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OSCAR WILDE



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A Summing-Up

by

LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS

DUCKWORTH

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CHAPTER I

I HAVE used much time and much expense of spirit in preliminary wrestling with my thoughts over this book. From the first moment of its inception I have been confronted with a painful dilemma. On the one hand I have naturally wished to avoid any appearance of holding a brief for Oscar Wilde's vices, and on the other hand I have prayed to be delivered from censorious moralisings which would come very ill from my lips or my pen. My friend—and he has indeed proved himself a true friend—Mr. Bernard Shaw wrote to me not long ago, when I told him I was going to write this book, begging me to 'get as much detergent fun into the case' as I could. Mr. Shaw himself might well be capable of getting fun into a book on Oscar Wilde; he has, indeed, done something of the sort in his preface to the regrettable re-issue of the late Frank Harris's preposterous *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* for which he made himself responsible with my very reluctantly given consent. But Mr. Shaw never liked Wilde, and, though he is the kindest-hearted of men, who as I have often told him spends a great deal of his time in the St. Christopher-like employment of carrying forlorn

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children over deep rivers, he remains, when all is said and done, slightly inhuman in his attitude towards life when he takes his pen in hand.

The result has been that the ‘fun’ he has imported into the tragedy of Oscar Wilde is not a little tainted with cruelty at the expense of poor Oscar himself and his faithful defender, admirer and friend, Robert Harborough Sherard.

The fact that Mr. Shaw has gone out of his way in that brilliant preface to Harris’s clumsy farrago of lies and misrepresentations to give me a tremendous ‘boost’ from the literary point of view, and also to defend my character in an essentially truthful and entirely chivalrous way, cannot blind me to the obvious *parti pris* against Wilde that he exhibits. What is one to say to a man of Mr. Shaw’s transcendent literary achievements who calls *The Importance of Being Earnest* a ‘mechanical farce’? My own opinion about *The Importance of Being Earnest* is that it is almost on a level with the best comedies that have ever been written in the English language which I take to be the three great Shakesperian comedies, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *As You Like It*, (and I don’t mind throwing in *Man and Superman*) and that it is as much superior to anything that Sheridan ever wrote as Sheridan is himself superior to, say, Henry Arthur Jones.

Not that there is anything ‘cruel’ in calling

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The Importance of Being Earnest a mechanical farce. Such a pronouncement is neither more nor less damaging than Mr. Shaw's similar 'attacks' on Shakespeare, whom Mr. Shaw affects to despise but whose text he 'knows backwards' and to whom he never ceases, whether he knows it or not, to pay homage in his heart.

No ; the cruelty to which I am referring is the cruelty of finding comedy or farce in the frightful tragedy of Oscar Wilde's terrible pilgrimage.

This is what Mr. Shaw says : 'Please let us hear no more of the tragedy of Oscar Wilde. Oscar was no tragedian. He was the superb comedian of his century, one to whom misfortune, disgrace, imprisonment were external and traumatic. His gaiety of soul was invulnerable : it shines through the blackest pages of his *De Profundis* as clearly as in his funniest epigrams. Even on his deathbed he found in himself no pity for himself, playing for the laugh with his last breath, and getting it with as sure a stroke as in his palmiest prime. Not so the young disciple whose fortunes were poisoned and ruined through their attachment. The tragedy is his tragedy, not Oscar's.'

But why, my dear St. Christopher, should my tragedy, which I am far from denying or repudiating, exclude or obscure Oscar Wilde's far

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greater tragedy? The passage I have quoted from Mr. Shaw's preface to *Harris* is an example of what I call his cruelty to Wilde. There are other examples of it in the same piece of writing. Yet I am constrained to admit that between Mr. Shaw, who dislikes Wilde, and Mr. Sherard, who adores him, I find myself unable to come down quite definitely on one side or the other. If Mr. Shaw is unfair to Wilde, Sherard is perhaps even more so; quite unconsciously of course.

Sherard maintains all through his 'Life' of Wilde and his other books on the same subject that what he calls Wilde's 'cruel and devilish madness,' that is to say his homosexual activities, were the result of attacks of epileptic mania. He imagines that Wilde committed the acts for which he was convicted in periodical bouts of insanity engendered by syphilis, and that he was almost unconscious of them after he had committed them. This of course is nonsense, if I may say so without offending Mr. Sherard for whom I have the greatest respect and friendship. Shaw's account is so obviously the true one that I can hardly believe that Mr. Sherard has not by this time admitted its unanswerable cogency. Shaw says: 'I do not believe that he (Wilde) ever condescended to denials except when legal fictions were necessary. Like most similarly afflicted men of

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culture, he was not only unashamed of his reversed sex instinct but proud of it, and of its association with some great names. But he never thrust it upon those of his friends to whom it was repugnant.' That is, of course, the plain truth. Sherard's attempted explanations of and excuses for Wilde's conduct would have driven Wilde to fury and exasperation, and they do indeed, to this day, irritate and exasperate Wilde's friends who know the truth about him. The fact is that Mr. Sherard in these particular regards always was and remains (to his credit I say it) of an innocence which the French would describe as *formidable*.

I myself know at least as much about all this as anyone else, and the fact that I completely changed my views on the subject nearly forty years ago, and indeed reacted violently in the opposite direction, does not obscure my knowledge and memory of the actual events and the atmosphere that surrounded them. Wilde was never in the least degree ashamed of his homosexuality. On the contrary he gloried in it and was not above attributing the same tastes to Shakespeare (utterly wrongly as I believe) and even to Plato although, since he was a Greek scholar, he must have known perfectly well that the philosopher was entirely against them.

My position throughout this short sketch of

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Wilde's career is founded on the love I had for him and still have (after an interval of turning against him) whose counterpart informed the magnificent definition of friendship attributed to the schoolboy who, when required in class to give a definition of a friend, wrote, 'A friend is someone who knows all about you and still goes on liking you.' I know all about Oscar Wilde and I still go on liking him; and my love for him has even outlived the resentment and indignation I felt against him when I found out, twelve years after his death, that he had 'attacked' me in the unpublished part of his letter to me written in prison which the late Robert Ross faked up into the book called *De Profundis*.

Having thus cleared the ground by explaining my attitude towards Wilde's homosexuality, I hope I can proceed to write about him quite objectively, and with as little reference to myself and any grievances I may have had about what Mr. Shaw rightly calls my tragedy, as is compatible with the accurate narration of the events which make up his story. I hope I may be allowed to say what has to be said about Wilde's vices without it being necessary to embellish my remarks with conventional repetitions of assurances of the orthodoxy of my own sentiments in these regards. As a Christian and a Catholic I naturally and inevitably disapprove

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deeply of homosexuality. As a philosopher, on the other hand, I may be able to recognise that the exaggerated horror of it which prevailed in Wilde's time and in my youth was mainly hypocritical and squared very imperfectly with the private lives of a large proportion of those people who most loudly condemned it. In any case hypocrisy and pharisaism, being spiritual sins, are worse than sins of the flesh; and at the risk of being taken to task as I recently was, very kindly and politely, in a Catholic paper for 'verging on heretical opinion' by appearing to question the universality of the moral law, I shall continue to think and say that Wilde's treatment by an English judge, and by English newspapers and English society in general, was cruel and wicked and a gross sin against charity. England is largely a pagan country, and it is in no position to lash itself into a fury of condemnation of pagan practices. Is this heresy? I greatly doubt it. An immoral action is certainly always immoral and wrong, whether it is committed in a Christian or a pagan country; but, all the same, people who live in glass houses should refrain from throwing stones, and those afflicted with beams in their eyes should moderate their holy transports on the question of motes.

I have recently been re-reading Mr. Sherard's books on Oscar Wilde. I know, and it is a

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source of deep satisfaction to me to know, that Mr. Sherard has entirely changed his views about the part which I myself played in the drama. He certainly wronged and misjudged me very much, and he has now made me the most handsome and generous *amende* in his latest book; but I find myself sometimes wondering whether, even now, after all that has happened, and when his former admiration for Robert Ross has turned into disgust and loathing, he realises how entirely on the wrong tack he was in his efforts to defend Wilde in the way he attempted to do it. In order to defend Wilde it is absolutely necessary to realise what Wilde's attitude was towards the accusations which were brought against him and which, broadly speaking, were established as undoubted facts.

Wilde himself never denied them at all, except, as Mr. Shaw points out, 'when legal fictions were necessary in the law courts.' Nothing annoyed, nay enraged, him more than to be assured by anyone whom he met, or who wrote to him, of a firm belief in his 'innocence'. Imagine the feelings of any man who has done something of which he is entirely proud and which he regards as a great feather in his cap, when a sympathiser and admirer says to him 'nothing in the world would ever make me believe that you were guilty of such an action.'

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If I were ever to bring myself to believe that you could possibly have done such a thing, it could only be because I would be convinced that you did it in an attack of epileptic mania or as the result of the ravages on your brain caused by a terrible disease.' Yet this is exactly what Mr. Sherard does.

To defend Wilde one must first of all, and above everything else, realise and admit that he was entirely guilty of what he was charged with and that he went on up till the time of his last illness doing the same things without the slightest qualm or compunction. As he was undoubtedly received into the Catholic Church on his death-bed, any Catholic—indeed any Christian, Catholic or not—is entitled, nay bound, to believe that he did ultimately realise and admit the sinfulness and wickedness of what he had been doing. I do not doubt it for a moment myself. I would no more question his conversion than I would impugn that of the penitent thief who is revered by Catholics as St. Dismas and who received a plenary absolution from Christ Himself. Wilde's conversion was the result of many days and hours of mortal agony. It was wonderful, but no more wonderful than a thousand other such death-bed conversions. No believing Christian could possibly justify disbelief in it. A Mr. Thomas Bell who was Frank Harris's private

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secretary at the time of Wilde's death has written a book which contains much interesting and useful matter, particularly useful to me because it confirms and substantiates the accusation of swindling me out of two thousand pounds which I brought against Harris in my *Autobiography*. Mr. Bell now resides in California and his book has not yet found a publisher. I have read it because he sent me a typed copy of it. In this book Mr. Bell says flatly that Wilde did not become a Catholic on his death-bed. The answer to this is that Mr. Bell, who on his own showing has no first-hand information on the subject, is quite mistaken, and that, as an agnostic or an atheist, he has allowed his prejudices to commit him to a statement which one might, if one were not anxious to be polite, describe as a lie. The evidence of Wilde's conversion is overwhelming. It is contained in, amongst other books, my *Autobiography* and my last published book *Without Apology* and it has recently been confirmed and strengthened by the Right Reverend Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair in his book *In Victorian Days* published a short time ago.

It is precisely this assurance that Wilde died a Catholic that has enabled me to undertake the task of writing this book.

CHAPTER II

WHEN I speak of defending Wilde, I do not mean defending his vices. It is not possible for anyone who accepts the morality of Christian ethics, as I do, to defend homosexuality. As it happens, I have more reason than most people have for condemning and hating it. I would to God I had never heard or known anything about it. When I refer to defending Wilde I mean defending his character apart from his vices. At the time when he was convicted this simply could not be done. The violent prejudice against homosexuality which existed in those days—half of it, as I believe, simulated and hypocritical—made it almost literally impossible for anyone to say a good word for any person who was known to be addicted to it. Mr. Robert Sherard, for example, was all his life a fanatical hater of the vice. He not only hated it but he utterly failed to understand anything about it, and, as I have already pointed out, looked upon it as an appalling form of madness. Yet just because he tried to defend Wilde's character and to speak up for his genius, he was attacked and vilified by people who thought, or pretended to think, that no one could say a good word for a homosexualist unless he were inclined to be 'that

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way' himself. In those days the vice was considered far worse than murder. Even at this day, when a tremendous change of opinion has taken place on the subject, I have no doubt at all that there are a number of people who believe that it is a form of 'devilish insanity.' It is, of course, simply a sin of the flesh, and is no worse than adultery or fornication. Sooner or later the criminal law will have to be revised on the basis of admitting this fact, which involves the principle that the law is not concerned with sin but merely with crime. Sometimes a sin is also a crime (for example, a murder or theft) but this is not the case with homosexuality any more than with adultery.

This principle is so obviously true that it was inevitable that a man who was treated as Wilde was—tortured and starved into madness, and to the almost complete paralysis of his creative brain-power—should ultimately begin to take on the appearance of a martyr.

In a letter I wrote to my mother in 1897 when, by threatening to stop my allowance, she compelled me, in my own interests as she of course believed, to leave Oscar Wilde in Naples where I had received him into my villa, I used these words, after explaining that I was now resigned to leaving him on condition that she would send him two hundred pounds so that he might not be left destitute:

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‘Don’t think that I have changed about him or that I have changed my views about morals. I still love and admire him, and I think he has been infamously treated by ignorant and cruel brutes. I look upon him as a martyr to progress. I associate myself with him in everything. I long to hear of his success and rehabilitation in the post which is his by right at the very summit of English literature, nor do I intend to cease corresponding with him or not to see him from time to time in Paris and elsewhere. I give up nothing and admit no point against him or myself separately or jointly.’

At that time I not only loved and admired Wilde as a friend and a man of great genius, but I entirely sympathised with his vices which I did not regard as vices at all. I was a complete and frank pagan and scorned the Christian ethic. That being so, it should be obvious to any honest man that my attitude towards him was, from my point of view, perfectly justified. The fact that I now loathe and detest what I then thought innocuous, if not actually a fine thing in itself, cannot prevent me from seeing that, according to my then lights, the attitude I took up was courageous and admirable. I was fifty years in advance of my time. I was persecuted, almost as badly as Wilde was himself, for that attitude which

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never varied right up to the time of Wilde's death. I was in perfect good faith; my only fault was that I declined to conform to what I considered to be the hypocritical pretence that homosexuality was an offence in a class by itself and worse than murder. I dare say I shall find it difficult to convince people, especially young people, that I am not exaggerating in what I say about the attitude towards the vice which prevailed at that time. When I used to go about Paris with Wilde after his conviction, I have frequently known it to happen that Englishmen who saw us together in a restaurant or *café* would get up and leave (like the Duke of Berwick in my rhyme) 'in a marked manner,' or make complaints to the proprietor. On one occasion I took Wilde, against his wish, into the Chatham Bar in the rue Daunou where I was well known as an habitual frequenter. The barman, a snivelling little Yankee, refused to serve us with drinks. At least, he was kind enough to say that I could have one but that he 'couldn't serve the other gentleman.' I used hair-raising language and went out with Wilde. There was nothing else I could do which would not have made the situation worse. If this was the sort of way people went on in Paris which is by tradition the most broad-minded and tolerant city in Europe, one can imagine what would have

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happened to Wilde and any friend of his if they had tried to go about London in the 'Nineties, or right up to the War of 1914. Now, I ask, is there at this date a living creature in England who would deny that such treatment of an outstanding artist and man of letters, a poet and a gentleman by birth and education as well as by natural sweetness of disposition and native kindness, was disgusting and foul? Yet so it was in the gay 'Nineties in the City of Light.

I have, as I hope is well known, nothing but abhorrence for homosexuality, but I have not changed the views I expressed to my mother in the letter I wrote to her in 1897 from which I quoted above. If I happened to have a friend who was a homosexualist—and it is quite probable that, whether I know it or not, I have some of both sexes—I would still feel just as indignant if he or she were badly treated as I did forty-five years ago. Of course it is not possible that anything like the Chatham Bar incident should happen nowadays even in London, much less in Paris. Yet in the meanwhile the criminal law goes on in England just the same and produces its yearly crop of frightful tragedies and injustices. In France, which is still a Catholic country, the *code Napoléon* takes no cognisance of homosexuality. It is not a criminal offence

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and is exactly on the same level as any other form of immorality. That is to say it only becomes a criminal offence when publicity makes it an *outrage aux moeurs publiques*. Yet I venture to say, and I wonder if anyone will be able to contradict me with any facts to support his contradiction, that this form of vice is more prevalent in England than it is in France. It always was. For hundreds of years the French have called it *le vice Anglais*. Someone may ask me whether I really think that a man should be allowed to go about corrupting boys—and this by the way is a thing which was never suggested against Wilde whose ‘victims,’ as I have already pointed out in another book, were without exception accomplices and not strictly speaking victims at all—and my reply is that there are a thousand ways of protecting boys from being corrupted without invoking the criminal law, just as there are a thousand ways of protecting girls from being seduced by men, or boys being seduced by women, or men and women being lured into adultery. The point is that all these moral catastrophes are liable to occur and that there is nothing whatever in homosexuality which differentiates it from other forms of immorality, unless one might argue that it is considerably less harmful in its results than seduction of girls or adultery. A married woman who takes a lover and has a

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child by him may thus at one stroke destroy for ever a family that has endured for centuries. I remember being told years ago by a Highland laird with whom I was shooting woodcock in the Hebrides that he was standing by a certain Scottish duke, his cousin, when the duke's eldest son was being buried. As the coffin was being lowered into the grave the duke, with tears running down his cheeks, said to my friend 'There goes the last of the ——s.' But legally he had two other sons, one of whom eventually succeeded to the title and estates. It seems to me that if one leaves out humbug and cant and lies, and looks straight at the facts it would be impossible to think of any consequence as devastating as that as the result of homosexuality. On the other hand of course it is a grave sin; but so are lying and hypocrisy and blasphemy, for none of which is there any legal penalty. Why should this particular sin be singled out for frightful penalties? For the penalties are frightful even to-day. Nowadays, when people are able to discuss the subject without foaming at the mouth or throwing a fit, perhaps someone will kindly come along and try to explain where, if anywhere, there is a flaw in my argument. I defy anyone to do so. In the 'Nineties, merely for writing what I have just written a man would have been ruined for ever. No writer in a

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paper or reviewer of books would have attempted to give him a reasoned or logical answer. To do so would have automatically rendered the reviewer an object of suspicion to his editor and the reading public. The correct answer in the 'Nineties to such an argument as I have put forward was to call for an 'ounce of civet' or demand the immediate opening of all the windows within the five-mile radius. It took me years to realise that opinion really had changed and that at last it had become possible in this blessed earth, this realm, this England, to talk plain common sense on this particular subject. The trouble is now that people are free not only to talk or write common sense about it but they are also free to talk and write nonsense about it and to confuse all the issues. Still, on the whole things have changed greatly for the better.

A judge who used the language to a convicted prisoner which Mr. Justice Wills used to Wilde when sentencing him would now, I believe, be looked upon almost universally with horror and disgust and indignation. After giving Wilde the outrageous sentence of two years hard labour Mr. Justice Wills not only grossly insulted the defenceless prisoner but expressed the opinion that the sentence was utterly inadequate and said he deeply regretted that it was not in his power to make it more. I

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wrote to him at the time from Paris, forty-five years ago, being then little more than an infant, and told him what I thought of him. It consoles me to remember this, and while I am on the subject I would like to make it plain that the person who, according to Mr. Sherard's account, wrote a number of anonymous postcards to Mr. Justice Wills on the same subject was not I. My only letter to Wills was duly signed; I have never written an anonymous letter in my life. I mention this because in the margin of the page recounting this circumstance in the copy of Mr. Sherard's book which I have lately been reading someone has written 'Douglas' opposite the statement about anonymous postcards. One of my numerous 'brilliant cross-examiners' in the law courts, in the course of the inevitable mud-slinging about my relations with Wilde, which at one time was considered to be *de rigueur* whenever I appeared in the witness-box, was kind enough to 'put it to me' that I had written a number of anonymous postcards to Wills. My reply to this accusation (I think it was made by counsel in the trial of the libel action I brought in 1913 against Mr. Arthur Ransome) was substantially the same as I have just recorded here. I told him that I certainly had written a signed letter to Mr. Justice Wills telling him what I thought of him, but that I had never written to him on

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any other occasion, and that I had never written an anonymous letter to anyone in my life.

I don't think there is now a judge on the bench—since the regretted death of Mr. Justice Darling—who to-day would talk nonsense about homosexuality to a prisoner. Judges nowadays can afford to let the public and the bar take it for granted that they do not approve of vice, without thinking it necessary to emphasise and advertise their virtue by insulting a helpless prisoner who cannot answer back without exposing himself to the risk of getting a more severe sentence. Mr. Justice Darling invariably foamed at the mouth, literally as well as metaphorically, whenever the subject of homosexuality came up in his court. The poor man belonged to the 'Nineties and pre-'Nineties period when such an attitude was expected by public opinion. All the same I think he did sometimes 'protest too much.' People who talk in that sort of way have only themselves to blame if they are sometimes suspected of trying to establish a moral 'alibi.' One of the things that I most regret in my life is that in the aforesaid trial of the Ransome libel suit I myself was cowardly enough to take up, in some respects, the same attitude. It was a great mistake, and in conjunction with Darling's unfairness and hostility probably lost me the case. If I had told the exact truth in that case,

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as I did afterwards in all my other cases, I think I would have won it in spite of all Mr. Justice Darling's efforts to make me lose it. That I subsequently completely turned the tables on my adversaries, including Mr. Justice Darling himself, is a matter of history. I had much excuse for the way I 'hedged' about the truth in the Ransome case because at that date (1913) it was still almost impossible in England to tell the truth in those regards. A man in such a case was practically forced to pretend that the mere mention of homosexuality drove him into paroxysms of horror. Any other attitude meant insult and abuse from the judge and a verdict against the rash truth-teller from the jury. I am proud to think that in the long run I was the first to be successful in breaking down this poisonous convention in the law courts. I subsequently won case after case in the teeth of the most violent prejudice and unfairness by telling the truth. I refer readers who may think I am exaggerating to what Mr. Bernard Shaw says about my legal feats in his preface to Frank Harris's book on Wilde published by Constable in 1938.

Even as long ago as 1895 when Wilde was prosecuted by the Treasury it would have been infinitely better for him if he had told the truth. Every lawyer, every solicitor and every counsel at the bar, would have told him that to do so

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would be utterly fatal. But if he had had the courage to do it—and how can I blame him when I hadn't courage enough to do much less in 1913?—he could not have been worse off than he was. He got a maximum sentence and of course lied all the way through the case by denying things which he not only had done, but would, in argument, anywhere outside a court of law, have defended to the last as perfectly justifiable. So what did he gain ? Nothing at all. He rather lost heavily, because he missed the chance of striking a blow for justice by telling the truth and saying what he really thought and passionately believed. As it was, he only confused the issue by his fine and moving defence of love (without sin) between persons of the same sex which obviously needs no defence and is glorified in the Holy Scriptures and in Shakespeare's incomparable Sonnets. Had he told the truth he would almost certainly have been convicted and sentenced, but how much stronger and finer would have been his position then (at the time of his trial) and afterwards! Except for being sent to prison (which is a thing that might happen to anyone, and did happen to the Apostles, as we read in the New Testament) he would have had a complete moral triumph. If he had had the good sense and the nerve to 'scrap' Sir Edward Clarke and to conduct his own case,

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he would at least have cut a much finer figure, and might even, just conceivably, have 'got' the jury. I have seen such a hundred to one chance come off more than once in the law courts. But, as Lady Bracknell might say, these speculations are fruitless. If I myself had had the sense and the nerve to put him up to it in those far-off days, when he would have done anything in the world I asked him to do, he might have tried it; and I would have gone into the witness-box for him (Clarke refused to call me in spite of my repeatedly imploring him to do so) and between the two of us, neither of us being without brains and courage, we might have made a certain amount of history. I don't believe he would have got off even so, but we would have at least 'put up a terrific show,' and the result could not possibly have been worse than it was.

CHAPTER III

MR. BERNARD SHAW, in his preface to the new edition of Frank Harris's 'Life' of Wilde, makes, with great skill and acumen, a point which I do not remember having been made before. He says: 'Wilde could plead Not Guilty with perfect sincerity and indeed could not honestly put in any other plea. Guilty or not guilty is a question not of fact but of morals: the prisoner who pleads Not Guilty is not alleging that he did this or did not do that: he is affirming that what he did does not involve any guilt on his part.' I would develop this argument by saying that a man rightly accused of homosexuality is perfectly entitled to plead Not Guilty in a legal sense. He might admit that he was technically guilty of a breach of a local law, and his conscience might tell him that he was guilty of a sin against the moral law, but if he believes, as Wilde certainly did, that homosexuality is not a crime, he is perfectly entitled to say he is not guilty of it. He is not bound, in the present state of the law in this country, to admit that he committed certain acts. So that when I said, a page or two back, that Wilde 'lied' all through his evidence in the case in which he was condemned I was

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really being less than fair to him. He was entitled to deny what he did deny because, as Mr. Shaw points out, he was entitled to deny guilt which he did not admit. All the same I still think that if he had admitted the acts and explained that he did not regard them as criminal, even though he might admit that they were sinful, his position would have been far better than it was and could not have been worse than it ultimately became. There is a passage in my *Autobiography* for which I have, I believe, sometimes been blamed. I relate how during the police court proceedings against Wilde, before he was committed for trial, I happened to meet in the corridor one of the witnesses for the prosecution with whom I was personally acquainted. I quote from my book as follows: 'Before I leave the subject of Oscar's trial and conviction I will explain my allusion a few pages back to the one witness who, after giving a 'proof' of his evidence to the prosecution declined to bear it out in the witness-box. This youth was a gentleman by birth and of an entirely different character and class to the other witnesses. He was terrorised into making a statement against Wilde (I am not suggesting that what he alleged may not have been true) by the same means as the other 'victims.'

That is to say he was offered the choice of giving evidence against Wilde or being himself

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prosecuted on a criminal charge as actually happened in the case of Alfred Taylor, who, to his lasting honour and credit, refused to give evidence against Wilde and as a consequence went to two years hard labour.

I happened to see him in the corridor at Bow Street police court while he was waiting to give evidence. I went up and shook hands with him and said: ‘Surely you are not going to give evidence against Oscar?’ He looked round in a frightened way, and then whispered: ‘Well, what can I do? I daren’t refuse to give evidence now, they got a statement out of me.’ I said: ‘For God’s sake remember you are a gentleman and a Public School boy. Don’t put yourself on a level with scum like — and — (two of the witnesses). When counsel asks you the questions, deny the whole thing, and say you made the statement because you were frightened by the police. They can’t do anything to you.’ He grabbed my hand and said: ‘All right, I’ll do what you say.’

He did (more power to him!). To the consternation of prosecuting counsel he denied his own statement, and swore that Wilde had never been anything to him but a good friend. Counsel, of course, dropped him like a hot brick; he was told to ‘stand down’ and walked out of the court having inflicted a very nasty jolt to the prosecution. . . . I do not think it fair

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to give this young man's name, but a reference to the reports in the papers would of course reveal it. I would not mention it if I did not think that what he did was greatly to his credit and perfectly justifiable. If all the other witnesses had replied in the same way, and by stating the fact that they gave their evidence only because it was a choice between the witness-box and the dock, the whole case would have been shoo'd out of court in a very short time, and one of the greatest and most far-reachingly disastrous scandals that ever afflicted this country would have been nipped in the bud."

A lawyer of my acquaintance once told me that by saying what I did to the witness in question I was 'suborning him to commit perjury.' Even if it were so I would not mind, and in similar circumstances I would do the same thing to-morrow, but I don't admit that when the youth denied the facts which he had admitted in his statement he was committing perjury. There are a great many snags about the use of the words 'law' and 'legal.' What is legal or lawful in one country is illegal and unlawful in another. In Soviet Russia it is a crime *not* to denounce your father and mother if you hear them expressing anti-Soviet sentiments. So a child who was tried for this

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offence would be faced with the alternative of betraying his father and mother to the tender mercies of an unspeakably foul tyranny or committing a crime against the state. Mr. Shaw's well-known partiality for Soviet Russia would not, one may be sure, prevent him from admiring and supporting the child who chose to defy the local law in such circumstances.

The point I am trying to make is that Wilde was entirely justified in denying any facts which would serve to convict him of something which is not, properly speaking, a crime at all, though even he would scarcely have disputed that it is a sin. But on the other hand if he had not denied the facts he would have shifted the whole question on to a higher plane. If he had gambled on it, he would almost certainly have lost, but there would have been a sporting chance that he might have captured the conscience of at least one jurymen, and one jurymen is enough to prevent a conviction. It actually happened in Wilde's first criminal trial before Mr. Justice Charles that one jurymen was 'convinced' of Wilde's innocence in the face of the overwhelming evidence against him. The result was a disagreement of the jury, and poor Oscar's appalling bad luck brought it about that this triumph—and it was a triumph to get a disagreement under the circumstances—merely had the result of his

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being tried again by Mr. Justice Wills whose inhuman treatment of him I have already stigmatised. Mr. Justice Charles would have given him six months. Wills gave him two years' hard labour. If there had been another disagreement the prosecution would undoubtedly have collapsed altogether.

Mr. Shaw's point about the sense in which a man may plead Not Guilty to an offence which in actual fact he has committed applies, *mutatis mutandis*, just as well to the case of juries. A jury, or one juryman, cannot be forced to bring in a verdict of guilty. All the judges in the world cannot compel a jury to bring in a verdict of guilty if they decide not to do it. I prophesy that ultimately this will be how the law governing the question we have been discussing will be revised. The time will come when juries will decline to bring in a verdict of Guilty in the case of a moral offence which is not a crime though it is admittedly a sin. In fact this has already happened on various occasions. Just as Wilde was entitled to plead Not Guilty because he did not admit the guilt of what he had done, and even boasted of doing, so a jury can conscientiously bring in a verdict of Not Guilty although the facts against a man are proved up to the hilt and to their own satisfaction.

A law may become null and void because it is

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repealed, or it may become null and void because juries refuse to endorse it. The law in England against homosexuality has no justification in religion. It is in fact in itself a gross sin against charity and directly traverses the law of Jesus Christ who intervened to save the adulterous woman from being stoned to death as she was properly and legally condemned to be. It seems to me perfectly obvious that this precept of Christ's, 'Let him that is without sin among you first cast a stone at her' covers all purely moral offences as distinct from crimes. It is a plain indication that the state is not concerned to punish purely moral offences, and in fact does so at its peril, collectively and individually. Put it this way. How can it ever be justifiable for a judge and jury to send a man to the torture and horror of two years' hard labour (there is no such sentence now) for an offence against morals? If they were all sinless saints they *wouldn't* do it, and if they were (as they would be) ordinary human beings and sinners they *couldn't* do it without staining their own consciences.

'If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.'

CHAPTER IV

OSCAR FINGAL O'FLAHERTIE WILLS WILDE was born in Dublin at No. 21 Westland Row, on the 16th of October, 1854. His parents moved to the larger No. 1 Merrion Square soon after his birth. His father, Mr. William Wilde (who was afterwards knighted) was the great-grandson of a Durham business man. Sir William's grandfather, Ralph Wilde, came to Ireland to seek his fortune in the middle of the eighteenth century and married an Irish lady of good birth, a Miss O'Flynn. He became land-agent to the Sandford family in the county of Roscommon. He was the father of, among other children, Thomas Wilde who became a country doctor and in due course married a Miss Fynn. This Doctor Thomas Wilde was the father of Sir William Wilde whose second son was Oscar Wilde.

Oscar's father, Sir William Wilde, married Jane Francisca Elgee, who was what might be described as a 'parlour Fenian.' I mean that she wrote revolutionary verses (she was a very bad poet) and denounced the 'English tyranny' in a weekly Dublin paper, *The Nation*, in violent language, but she did not disdain, in the end, to accept a small pension from the hands of 'the

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bloody tyrants.' She incited her countrymen to burn down 'the Castle,' the residence of the Lord Lieutenant, who knighted her husband, but her revolutionary pronouncements were evidently not taken seriously. She wrote her verses and articles under the name 'Speranza.'

She was a woman of culture and intellectual distinction and wrote a number of books which are now forgotten. It was a touching trait of poor Oscar's character that he always had an altogether exaggerated idea of his mother's mental powers and social standing. He really adored her and spoke of her always with the greatest reverence and respect. Those who knew her agreed that she was a kind-hearted and courageous woman, and that when, at the end of her days, she had declined into a rather shabby little house in Oakley Street, Chelsea, she still maintained a dignified and impressive manner, in spite of her queerness and eccentricity. Mr. W. B. Maxwell in his Reminiscences describes her as 'a walking family mausoleum' and 'a tragedy queen of suburban theatre.' These two descriptions were in relation to her appearance and somewhat fantastic method of dressing and adorning herself. The Comtesse de Brémont, who liked and admired her, admits that, with her towering headdresses of velvet and long gold earrings and her enormous bracelets of gold studded with turquoises,

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she produced a rather painful impression on those who saw her for the first time. There can be no doubt that she was very affected and a terrific *poseuse*. Oscar undoubtedly inherited this habit of posing from her. He was at one time a supreme *poseur*. But, being a man of genius, and of real erudition and scholarship, he was able to carry it off successfully, as his mother could not; and in the end, when his posing had served its turn, he completely dropped it.

By the time I got to know Oscar he had outlived his posing period. He made himself famous, or notorious, by this posing and by eccentric costume; but having achieved fame he had the practical good sense to drop his poses and to become entirely natural. I can only speak of him in this respect from my personal knowledge of him during the time when I knew him, that is to say during the last nine years of his life, nearly two of which he spent in prison; and I can testify that I never saw, or expect to see, a distinguished and celebrated man who posed less than Oscar. On the contrary, one of his greatest charms was that he was entirely natural, and said, utterly without fear or ‘respect of persons,’ exactly what he thought or meant to express on any given occasion. He was gifted also with a superb sense of humour which never deserted him right through his

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appearances in the criminal courts and even on his death-bed.

In relation to his mother one may say that he succeeded brilliantly, and without apparent effort, in producing in a few moments the dazzling effect on those who listened to him which Lady Wilde tried vainly to achieve all her life.

But all the same one must, in justice to Lady Wilde, allow that she and her eccentricities were what produced the finished Oscar. She tried all her life to create a certain effect, and failed ; but Oscar imitated and improved on her methods till he, ultimately, completely succeeded. The attempt to laugh him down as a ridiculous figure which was made at one time, chiefly in *Punch*, was an utter failure, and in the long run it is his detractors who appear ridiculous and also stupidly dense. There was more wit and humour in one day of Oscar Wilde than in a cycle of *Punch*. By the time I got to know him he was not only the most brilliant talker in London but he was so easily superior to those he met in society that he had no serious rival. I have seen him, over and over again in a country house or at a dinner table, dominate a group of people who began by being hostile or sneering. To 'get round ' them completely and turn them into admiring 'fans' was child's

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play to him. I have described in one of my books the astonishing manner in which he captured my father on the only occasion on which they met in a friendly way, at lunch at the Café Royal. It was an amazing performance. My father sat down, at my request, unwillingly and sulkily to the luncheon table, hating Oscar and having nothing but anger and contempt for him in his heart, yet in about ten minutes he was ‘eating out of his hand,’ to speak metaphorically, and on the following day he wrote to me and withdrew everything he had formerly said or written against him and said: ‘I don’t wonder you are so fond of him, he is a wonderful man.’

But to return to Oscar’s parents: one does not wish to depreciate them when one says that they were a couple who apart from being the parents of Oscar would have left no enduring memory behind them. The same is true of nine hundred and ninety thousand people out of every million. What is remembered about Sir William Wilde is that he was a brilliant surgeon and that he was involved in a painfully scandalous lawsuit in connection with one of his female patients. But this case would long ago have been forgotten if the unpleasant Frank Harris had not seized on it as a spicy ingredient for his book and written it up with as much pornographic detail as he could contrive to get

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into it. Apart from these claims to fame we learn that Sir William Wilde was a good talker, very hospitable, fond of fishing and other sport and a pretty heavy drinker. All of which, even including a scandal or two, might be said of thousands of upper-middle-class Irishmen of that period. It must be added that Sir William Wilde was an expert archaeologist and had a large acquaintance with Irish legend and folklore. Altogether, as the father of a man of genius he is quite adequate and impressive.

Oscar was sent to school as a boarder to Portora Royal School at Enniskillen when he was ten to eleven years old, his elder brother, Willy, having been already in residence there for a year. It may be worth mentioning that Lady Wilde is reported to have been longing for a girl when she was expecting her second child, and we are told that she was deeply disappointed when a boy was born to her. I quote from Mr. Robert Sherard's *Life of Oscar Wilde* as follows : 'It is said that she continued to dress up Oscar in petticoats and treat him as a girl long after the period customary in her days. She even used to hang jewels on her little son, which, according to George Claretie, made him look like a miniature Hindoo idol.'

I don't like contradicting Mr. Robert Sherard, nor would I be inclined to do so on a question of actual dates or facts, but I must here take the

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opportunity of saying that what he says (I think it is in a pamphlet he wrote refuting the lies of André Gide) about Oscar's 'feminine characteristics' does not agree with my own knowledge and observation. Mr. Sherard says that in Oscar's moral aberrations his rôle was a feminine one. I can't imagine how Mr. Sherard got hold of this idea, nor do I understand how he could possibly know if this were so or not, but I can say flatly that Mr. Sherard is quite wrong. Oscar Wilde's aberrations were simply and exactly what might be described as 'the usual public schoolboy business,' neither more nor less. One cannot really enter into details, but anyone who has been at a public school will know what I mean. Mr. Sherard, strangely enough, gives this piece of information about Oscar's femininity as if it were something calculated to diminish the gravity of the accusations brought against him. What I suppose he is trying to make out is that Oscar—perhaps as the result of his mother's attitude towards him as a child—had a feminine nature for which he was not responsible and that he acted accordingly. But I don't allow for a minute that Oscar had a feminine nature. In discussing the whole question of sex in my *Autobiography* (1929) I put forward the expression of my belief that nearly everyone is more or less bi-sexual, and Oscar Wilde was

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undoubtedly a case in point. But that he was markedly feminine or that his peculiar bent in relation to his abnormalities was feminine I definitely deny. I don't profess to be scientific about the subject but I have heard and read it argued by those who have dealt with the subject scientifically that homosexuality is a form of, or a result of, arrested development. I personally am pretty well convinced that it is so and that it explains why a vast number of boys and girls are more or less affected by it in their school-days and afterwards, generally speaking, grow out of it and almost forget all about it. This 'arrested development' may go hand in hand with the greatest intellectual distinction. It can co-exist with the most brilliant achievements in the sphere of the arts and letters. That it predisposes anyone who 'suffers' from it to homosexuality I feel pretty certain, but thousands, perhaps millions, of people who are predisposed to it never give way to it, at any rate after they have left school and college. I think it certain that Shakespeare, whose Sonnets I believe with Samuel Butler were written when he was between twenty-one and twenty-four (see my book on the subject, 1933), was exactly a case in point. I mean that he was potentially homosexual in his youth and outgrew it later. One is obliged to go on 'rubbing in' this distinction between

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potential and actual addiction to the vice because it is continually being obscured, sometimes dishonestly and at other times ignorantly. In his celebrated defence of homosexuality made by Oscar Wilde from the witness-box in his second criminal trial at the Old Bailey he deliberately, and in the circumstances justifiably, confused this issue, and, as is almost invariably done by homosexualists when they are defending themselves, he brought in the name of Shakespeare. He was of course entitled to do all he could to defend himself, to try to capture the sympathy of the jury and to offset the coarse and crude brutalities of judge and counsel, but he knew perfectly well that he was confusing the issue, for, as is made plain by a passage in *Dorian Gray*, he did not believe any more than I do that Shakespeare's homosexuality was active anywhere outside his brain. Shakespeare was a moralist and not far from being a puritan, and Wilde knew far too much about Shakespeare not to know it. Shakespeare would have recoiled in utter loathing and horror from the acts for which Wilde was convicted, but at the same time he was potentially a homosexualist, at any rate when he wrote the Sonnets to Master Will Hughes, whose actual existence and identity I have now succeeded in establishing from an entry in the Archives of Canterbury Cathedral following a

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search most kindly made at my request on the instructions of the Dean of Canterbury. I wrote a letter a few months ago giving the details of this highly important discovery in the *Times Literary Supplement* which if it had appeared twenty years ago would have caused a tremendous stir, if not an earthquake, in literary circles, but which passed almost entirely unnoticed by the present day ‘eminent Shakespearian scholars’ of whose eminence we are continually being told.

It is my recognition of the undoubted fact that potential, as distinct from actual, homosexuality is frequently allied with genius which made me put the word ‘suffers’ in inverted commas when I was identifying it with ‘arrested development.’ One does not ‘suffer’ anything which is innocuous and blameless, and as long as potential homosexuality remains only in the brain it is a tremendous and perfectly blameless intellectual stimulus, as in the case of Shakespeare. In the case of Marlowe one may well feel pretty sure that it did not remain only in his brain. There is no evidence against Marlowe except in his own written words of course, but the evidence, all all the same, is pretty strong.

Oscar spent six years at Portora School. I once asked him if there was ‘any of that sort of

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thing' at school in his day. He said: 'No, not as far as I know. There was nothing more than sentimental friendships.' I put this on record as an additional reply to the obvious lies of Frank Harris who characteristically invented a pseudo-homosexual story about Oscar and a schoolfellow at Portora. The story reads like an invention and it is specifically refuted by Robert Sherard, but I give my additional testimony which was not available as far as I know to Sherard or anyone else among those who have written books about him. Mr. Arthur Ransome in his book on Wilde says : 'he (Wilde) first experimented with the vice in 1886, it became a habit in 1889.' I imagine that this is correct because Mr. Ransome got all the material for his book from Robert Ross, who was an active homosexualist long before Wilde was and who knew him intimately several years before I met him. I met Wilde in 1891.

I think it more than probable (and I know Robert Sherard agrees with me) that it was Ross who first 'initiated' Oscar Wilde. I have it on Oscar's own word, confirmed by Robert Sherard, that it was Ross who brought him back to his bad ways again at Bernaval after he had renounced them on his release from prison.

CHAPTER V

OSCAR, as I have said, went to Portora when he was eleven. By the time he was thirteen he was very high up in the school. According to his biographer, Robert Sherard, it is recorded of him that he 'got quicker into a book than any boy that ever lived.' He retained this gift all through his life. He told me once that he could read a book 'both pages together.' I suppose that, literally, this could not be possible, but he did 'devour' books with the most amazing rapidity. Watching him turning over the pages of a novel one would have imagined that he was merely skimming the book. But by the time he had finished it, in about twenty minutes, he had got it all into his head and could give a complete and detailed account of it. In fact he frequently made a story out of the book which was a great improvement on the original. So much so that more than once I found that after hearing his version of a book and obtaining it on the strength of his account of it, I was greatly disappointed when I had read it for myself.

On the other hand, one must record the fact that at school he was a complete dunce at mathematics. A school-fellow of his, according

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to Sherard, described him as ‘absolutely incapable of mathematics.’ The poet Lionel Johnson, who was a great friend of mine at Oxford, was just the same. He got a double first at Oxford, and in addition to being a very fine poet, he was a man of immense learning and erudition, but he could not pass ‘Smalls’ because he was ploughed (I believe three times) in mathematics (and the mathematics in ‘Smalls’ are quite elementary). In the end the examiners just ‘let him through,’ knowing that he was a great scholar who was certain to get a double first in classics and that, strictly speaking, he had incurred the penalty of being ‘sent down’ as incapable of passing ‘Smalls,’ which would have been an irretrievable disaster such as they could not patiently contemplate. I wish I were well enough informed to be able to say whether or not this aversion to mathematics is particularly characteristic of poets, but honestly I cannot recall that the ‘lives of the poets,’ generally speaking, reveal anything of the kind. It would suit me very well if it were so, for I myself am a poet, and I always was very bad at mathematics and was ploughed in ‘Smalls’ at Oxford for that reason on one occasion; but I was evidently not quite so hopeless in that direction as Lionel Johnson was, because I did pass in mathematics at the second attempt! Lionel Johnson told me that

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he would *never* have been able to pass, and apparently Oscar Wilde was almost as bad in this respect.

Oscar and his brother Willy were great friends at school, and indeed family affection was a pleasing trait of Oscar's character. The loss, by early death, of his little sister was a sorrow which never altogether left him, and his devotion to his mother I have already alluded to. It should be noted here that Lady Wilde in her youth was distinctly a beauty. She was indeed strikingly handsome and retained her good looks even in her old age, and Oscar worshipped beauty and could not resist it in either sex. Oscar was also very fond of his father and described him to me as a man of the greatest social charm and intellectual superiority. Evidently and indubitably Oscar's childhood was a happy one. What was lacking was, no doubt, a moral or ethical background. I quote from Sherard as follows : 'It was an artificial atmosphere in which the lad, Oscar, was reared. It is wonderful that he escaped that taint of precocity for which the English dictionary has another and less euphonious term. It is more wonderful still that until his inherent madness broke out he escaped the taint of moral laxness which infected the air of his father's house. Here high thinking did not go hand in hand with plain living. The house

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was a hospitable one; it was a house of opulence and carouse; of late suppers and deep drinking; of careless talk and example. His father's gallantries were the talk of Dublin. Even his mother, though a woman of spotless life and honour, had a loose way of talking which might have been a danger to her sons . . . the mother's *salon*, the father's supper table were frequented by boozy and boisterous Bohemians, than whom no City more than Dublin furnishes stranger specimens. How free was the conversation which went on there in the presence of the two lads may be gathered from a remark which Oscar Wilde made to a fellow undergraduate at Trinity College. 'Come home with me,' he said, 'I want to introduce you to my mother. We have founded a society for the suppression of virtue.'

Sherard goes on to say that this remark of Oscar's was of the same nature as similarly foolish remarks made by the great French poet Charles Baudelaire who, being asked why he sometimes said such foolish things, replied, '*c'est pour épater les sots.*' No doubt Oscar all his life took a certain delight in shocking the respectable. I am afraid that with poets, whatever may be the case as regards an aversion to mathematics, there is apt to be a tendency to indulge this propensity. Not that I wish to identify *les sots* with the respectable, far from

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it, but the word ‘respectable’ has almost acquired in some mouths a derogatory meaning which does not properly belong to it. Wrongly and foolishly of course, for ‘respectable’ simply means ‘worthy of respect.’ Mr. Shaw in his preface to Harris’s ‘Life’ of Wilde attributes a similar idiosyncrasy to me (having previously compared me favourably to Shelley) and says that I belonged in my youth to ‘a generation of young bloods whose pet affectation it was to be steeped in impossible scarlet sins, and to *épater le bourgeois*.’ This last phrase is the one more often attributed to the process described by Baudelaire and it emphasises the unfortunate identification in the mind of the poet of *les sots* and *le bourgeois*, fools and respectable people. All wrong of course, and really sad and sickening. But there it is.

By the time Oscar made the remark about the society for the suppression of virtue to his fellow undergraduate in Dublin he had left school and gone to Trinity College. At school, we are told, he was not popular chiefly because he never played games. He was a big boy, very tall for his age and distinctly heavy in build. One of his school fellows says that ‘he used to flop about ponderously.’ Sherard prints a portrait of him (from a red chalk drawing) at this period. It is not at all attractive, which surprises me because Oscar really had claims to

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good looks later in his life and one would have expected him to have beauty in his boyhood. By the time I got to know him he was too fat for beauty, and time had already taken toll of him in other ways though he was only thirty-eight; but the photographs taken of him at the time of his American tour show that he really had a beautiful face and head. The ‘aesthetic costume’ he adopted after he left Oxford, ‘velvet coat, knee breeches, loose shirt, with a turn-down collar and a floating tie of some unusual shade, fastened in a *Lavalliere* knot’ would probably have repelled me if he had been wearing it when I first met him. I was, with all my unusualness in certain respects (I mean being a poet and a lover of the beautiful) a typical product of the English Public School system. I doubt whether I would have ‘swallowed’ the aesthetic Oscar. Fortunately however (or unfortunately according to the way one looks at subsequent events) he had completely discarded all eccentricities of costume at that time. He was dressed just like any other rather ‘smart’ English gentleman and though, as I have said, he was too fat, he was not at all bad looking. His general appearance was distinctly pleasing if rather unusual, and he had beautiful eyes. How he ever had the pluck to walk about the streets of London in his ‘aesthetic costume’ I cannot under-

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stand. But the fact is, of course, that he did have an enormous amount of pluck and moral courage. It must have taken all he had of those qualities to enable him to dare the gibes of the cockney street loafers and *gamins* whom he encountered when he took his walks abroad. Sherard thinks, and I agree with him, that he adopted his aesthetic costume chiefly because he was determined at all costs to attract attention to himself. He quotes a contemporary who wrote: ‘Oscar Wilde had said that for months he had tried in vain to find a publisher for his collected poems, and that having failed to do so, because he was an unknown man, he determined to make himself known, and hit upon the device of appearing in public in an extraordinary dress.’ His efforts were completely successful, and this is their justification. He got a publisher for his poems and he achieved such notoriety that it was for a long time a real handicap to him in other ways. In his case notoriety preceded fame. His contemporaries regarded his sartorial eccentricities as a proof that he was merely a *farceur* and overlooked his real genius for a long time. But Oscar Wilde was a man of great and outstanding genius. His eccentricities of dress were merely accidental and could not impair his supremacy. At his best he was a fine poet, he was a master of prose, and he was, ultimately,

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the author of comedies which can hold their place with the best that have ever been written in the English language. Outside England, where it is now the foolish and intellectually snobbish fashion for his inferiors to run him down, he is regarded as a supreme master and a giant in the literary world. His works have been translated into every language and he remains a consistent ‘best seller.’ He deliberately adopted an eccentric style of dress to get for himself, by a short cut, the audience which otherwise would, for many years, have been denied him. He was hated by society, but he forced people to listen to him. Sherard quotes as follows from a letter written by ‘a lady who belongs to the highest English nobility’: ‘I knew him first at a Huxley dinner, just after he left Oxford. I was then old enough to be his mother, but I thought I had never met so wonderful and brilliant a creature . . . even you seem hardly to know how the ordinary run of English society *hated* him. I was never allowed to ask him to our house. How unconscious he must have been of this hatred when he thought that society would stand by him.’ This hatred of Oscar on the part of English society was, it must be remembered, long before anything was known against his moral character or (if we are to accept Ransome’s statements about the time when his moral aberrations

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first began) long before there existed in fact anything against that character. Society hated him just because of his superiority, but if he were alive to-day he would be its lion.

Oscar graduated with an exhibition from Portora Royal School where he won the gold medal for classics in 1871, and matriculated as a Junior Freshman at Trinity College, Dublin, on October 10th of that year. A fortnight later, being then aged seventeen, he passed an entrance scholarship examination and was elected a ‘Queen’s Scholar.’ One of his contemporaries at Trinity College was Edward Carson, whose cross-examination of him in the Wilde-Queensberry case brought about his ruin at the Old Bailey in 1895. At Trinity he was known as a first-class classical scholar. Shortly after he came to Trinity he won a composition prize for Greek verse and was also awarded ‘a premium for composition at the term lectures.’ In January 1872 he was third out of eight in the first class in the ‘Examination for Honours,’ and in April of the same year he won the Michaelmas prize in classics. In June of that year he was elected to a University Scholarship on the Foundation with an annual grant of twenty pounds. In 1874 he won the Berkeley Gold Medal.

At Trinity he met the Rev. John Pentland Mahaffy, Precentor and Junior Dean of the

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College, who became his tutor and teacher in Greek. Mahaffy had a great influence (probably not for the good) over Oscar. He was a great lover of Greek art and in the preface of his *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* he acknowledges his debt to the undergraduate Wilde who, he says, had ‘made improvements and corrections all through the book.’ Mahaffy was an ultra-protestant and violently anti-Catholic. According to Mr. Boris Brasol, Wilde’s latest, and not far from his most able, biographer, Mahaffy ‘had all the earmarks of a rabid *libre penseur*, and the extravagances of his atheistic catechism used to shock even his agnostic co-religionists, so that only once was he permitted to deliver a sermon in the College Chapel.’ The Right Reverend Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair in his book *In Victorian Days* attributes to Mahaffy much of the pagan influence which turned Oscar Wilde away from his tendencies towards Catholicism when the two went on a journey to Greece while Wilde was at Oxford in 1877.

Oscar was not impressed by his contemporaries at Trinity; Mr. Sherard quotes him as follows : “ They thought of nothing but running and jumping: they varied these intellectual exercises with bouts of fighting and drinking. If they had any souls, they diverted them with coarse amours among barmaids and

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the women of the streets; they were simply awful!'

Oscar's reflections on the 'young barbarians all at play' who were his contemporaries must not be taken to denote that he himself despised all games and sports. He was fond of fishing and at Oxford he rode regularly though he did not hunt. A letter of his belonging to this period refers to 'lawn tennis at which I am awfully good,' and in another letter at that time, written in the vacation, he describes his life with two friends in a fishing lodge which he owned on Lough Fee in Connemara. 'I have been fishing here for the last three weeks. . . . I only got one salmon about $7\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. The sea trout however are very plentiful, we get a steady average of over five a day and lots of brown trout . . . one week more of this delightful heathery, mountainous lake-filled region, teeming with hares and trout. Then to Longford for the partridges, then home. This is certainly not the letter of a man who despises manly sport.

Oscar went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, when he was twenty, having won a demyship, that is to say a scholarship, worth £90 a year. He matriculated at Magdalen in October 1874, and remained in residence for four years, getting a first class in 'Mods' and a first class in 'Greats.' He also won the Newdigate Prize

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for poetry with a poem on Ravenna. This poem is distinctly above the average of Newdigate poems and establishes the fact that he was a ‘born’ poet in the sense that poetry came to him as a natural means of expression in early youth. I do not profess to be a great admirer of his early poetry, but it would be idle to pretend that it has not many merits and to deny that he knew how to write poetry, even if he was only a minor poet. If one compares him with the great majority of those who pass for poets in this year of grace 1940, he evidently far surpasses them. I think he was never more than a minor poet—largely because of his derivativeness which occasionally verges on plagiarism—till he achieved the right to be called a major poet by writing *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* directly after he came out of prison in 1897. He wrote this great ballad, which can compare favourably with the best ballads written in the English language, partly at Bernaval where he lived for a few months after his release from prison, and partly, and I may say chiefly, in my villa at Posilipo near Naples when he stayed with me for two or three months after leaving Bernaval. Most of his poetry was written during his Oxford days and within a few years after he left the University. Although he was and remained a poet, with a poet’s outlook on life all his days, he

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gave up writing poetry for many years and only took to it again right at the end of his life. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was his last work and probably the best thing, prose or poetry, that he ever did, though I would not care to argue that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is less as a work of art, because, precisely as a work of art, it appears to me to be faultless. I put the ballad higher only because, other things being equal, I rate poetry higher than prose, and because while *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a perfect work of art its subject matter is artificial and indeed trivial, in contrast to the ballad which is on the higher plane of thought and deals with the great emotions and movements of the soul of man. I do not claim that the ballad is a perfect work of art. It has certain faults and defects, but on the whole it is great poetry, and great poetry in my view must always be above even the best prose.

CHAPTER VI

ONE of Wilde's biographers has the following about Oscar's experiences at Oxford: 'Everything about Oxford seemed to appeal to Wilde's imagination (here follows a rhapsody about Magdalen walks, the grey walls of colleges, silver mists) . . . the fragrant fields and the pensive parks; the care-free atmosphere and aristocratic manners, and the whole tone of refinement so different from the crude Trinity *genre* and the Dublin bourgeois contentment. For once in his earthly existence, Wilde felt happy and exalted as though he were at the gates of a paradise into which, however, he was destined never to enter.'

So far so good. But the biographer, whom I refrain from naming, because a great deal of his book is admirable, goes on to say: 'Strangely, this enthusiasm, instead of uplifting his soul to lofty heights . . . dragged it down to the level of queer affectations; it led him into the labyrinth of sophisticated speculations, out of which he knew not how to find his way back to the road of normal growth and natural advancement.'

As an example of this distressing state of Oscar's mind we are told that he 'found the

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first outlet for his confused mood by decorating his rooms in College.

‘The ceilings were painted and he had hung on the walls a whole array of fine engravings . . . but the *pièce de résistance* in his scenic suite was the notorious set of blue china about which numerous stories have been recounted.

. . .’

I quote this extraordinary passage because I think it is a good example of the utter unfairness, and one might add silliness, of which Wilde was, all through his life, so often the victim. We are told that instead of rising to ‘lofty heights’ he was dragged down ‘to the level of queer affectations,’ and that his ‘confused mood’ led him to hang engravings on his walls and decorate his rooms with blue china.

What a terrible example of ‘queerness’ and ‘confusion of mind’! And really, with all respect to the biographer in question, what a fearful lot of blithering nonsense all this is. It reminds one of Carson, in the Queensberry trial, ‘eliciting in cross-examination,’ the damning admission that Wilde actually smoked *gold-tipped cigarettes* and even, the abandoned scoundrel, burnt odours, ‘ribbon of Bruges’ and other lascivious and demoralising ‘perfumes,’ in his house after entertaining guests to dinner. What fearful depravity. Surely it is time that all this kind of silliness came to an end.

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The truth is that Oscar at this period was just very much of a typical undergraduate. What, alone, differentiated him from his contemporaries was his mental and intellectual superiority, his wit and his brilliant conversation. A man who reads hard enough and is a sufficiently fine scholar to get a double first at Oxford and to win the Newdigate, having already at Trinity College, Dublin, at the age of seventeen, won the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek, might surely be allowed to hang engravings on his walls and buy a set of blue (or red, or green, or black) china without having it brought up against him as a sort of sinister foreshadowing sign of his future depravity. The fact that at Magdalen in Wilde's time there were a certain number of foolish half-baked youths who once tried to 'rag' him and break up his furniture and china ornaments, is merely an indication of the unfortunate fact that youthful undergraduate hooliganism is perennial.

Sir Frank Benson, the Shakespearian, who was a great friend of Oscar's gave the following account, in an article in *John O'London's Weekly*, of what happened to a party of Magdalen boys who came to Wilde's rooms to 'rag' him one night : 'Four intruders burst into the victim's room, the others following upstairs as spectators of the game. To the astonishment of the beholders, number one returned

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into their midst, propelled by a hefty boot-thrust down the stairs; the next received a punch in the wind that doubled him up on the top of his companions below, a third form was lifted bodily and hurled onto the heads of the spectators. Then came the triumphant Wilde, carrying the biggest of the gang, like a baby in his arms. He was about Wilde's size and weight, and hefty at that. But his struggles were useless, and he was borne by Wilde to his own rooms and buried by Wilde underneath a pile of the would-be ragger's fine furniture.'

The fact is that Oscar Wilde was a very powerful man, and he was also, then, and all his life, completely fearless. Twenty years after this exploit in his rooms at Magdalen when he routed the 'raggers,' he turned my father out of his house in Tite Street although the 'screaming scarlet Marquis' as Wilde, paraphrasing a phrase in his own poem 'The Sphinx,' used to call him, was an ex-amateur lightweight champion boxer, and although his lordship had taken the precaution to bring along a prize fighter to bear him company when he came to Oscar's house on his saving-his-beloved-son-from-wicked-influences mission. It is true that no force was used on that occasion. It never became necessary. Oscar was alone in his study when the two boxing stars were shown in unexpectedly by Oscar's miniature

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and trembling footman, a boy of seventeen, euphemistically described, subsequently, as ‘the butler,’ by my father and his pugilistic friend; and when he had listened to what Queensberry had to say Wilde rang the bell and said to ‘the butler’ ‘this man is the Marquis of Queensberry, the most infamous brute in London; never admit him to this house again.’ He then opened the door and said, ‘Get out,’ and the screaming scarlet marquis went like a lamb. Had my father attempted to attack him, Wilde could and would have picked him up and thrown him down the front-door steps. He was about five inches taller and four stone heavier than Q., and though he may not have been in quite first-class condition I wouldn’t have given my father a dog’s chance with him in a ‘rough-and-tumble,’ while as for the poor pugilist he was far too well behaved (as is the habit with pugilists except when they are drunk) to interfere in an argument between two gentlemen.

Oscar was as strong as a horse, and his admiration for fine engravings and blue china was, strange as it may seem, merely a sign, one of many, that he was a man of taste and perception. The implication that only decadents and weaklings admire fine engravings and blue china will not bear examination. It is, in short, purely idiotic.

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There is no object in lingering over Oscar at Oxford. He wrote a lot of poetry there which was extensively published by the *Irish Monthly* and other Dublin organs, and later by the London *World*; he came under the influence of Ruskin whom he revered and who enrolled him in his road-making gang of undergraduates, on whom he wished to impress a sense of ‘the dignity of labour,’ and he led a happy, high-spirited life with dozens of good friends and pleasant companions. His whole time at Oxford was indeed a triumphant success. Even being fined forty pounds by the College authorities for coming back three weeks late one term, after his expedition to Greece with Mahaffy, did not disturb his pleasant progress, especially as the College gave him back the money after he won the Newdigate, and when he finally ‘went down’ he simply moved to further triumphs in London.

There can be no doubt that his travels in Greece with Mahaffy exercised a tremendous and lasting effect on his mind. As Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair, who was one of his intimate friends at Magdalen, relates, he was at that time on the verge of becoming a Catholic. He wrote to an Oxford friend, Richard Harding, whom he used to call ‘Kitten’: ‘I start for Rome on Sunday: Mahaffy comes as far as Genoa with me; and I hope to see the golden

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dome of St. Peter's and the Eternal City by Tuesday night. This is an era of my life, a crisis—I wish I could look into the seeds of Time and see what is coming. I shall not forget you in Rome, and I will burn a candle for you at the Shrine of Our Lady.'

Only a few days later he writes again from Corfu, to 'Kitten': 'I never went to Rome at all! What a changeable fellow you must think me, but Mahaffy my old tutor carried me off to Greece with him to see Mykene and Athens—I am awfully ashamed of myself but I could not help it and will take Rome on my way back.'

To Mahaffy (quoting his own words) 'all culture culminated in Greece, all Greece in Athens, all Athens in its Acropolis, and all the Acropolis in the Parthenon.' He completely captured the mind of Wilde for Greece and for paganism as opposed to Catholicism. Oscar was influenced all his life by Greek art and by what is to this day wrongly believed by many to be the typically Greek inversion of sexual activity.

Mr. Brasol in his book on Wilde misquotes, in the most curious way, a passage from the *Symposium* of Plato. He makes Plato say, through Socrates, that lust is indulged in by 'men of base temperament, whose love . . . is directed towards boys rather than women.' What Plato wrote was exactly the

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opposite ; ‘ Men of debased temperament whose love is directed towards women rather than boys.’ Plato’s point, which Mr. Brasol has altogether missed, is that the love of boys, provided it is pure, is higher than the love of women. If Mr. Brasol re-reads the passage in the *Symposium* he will see that I am not mistaken. Socrates, into whose mouth Plato puts his philosophy, was an apostle of purity, but his argument in the *Symposium* requires a great deal of understanding. He says in effect (what is of course utterly repugnant to and alien from the generally accepted code) that the higher kind of men love boys, representing purity, rather than women, representing lust. It is very easy to misrepresent or misunderstand what he means, and I have always maintained that to teach boys, at Oxford, to read Plato is a very risky proceeding. Active homosexualists and others are frequently to be found claiming Plato and Socrates as belonging to the same persuasion as themselves. The egregious Frank Harris, in his ‘ Life ’ of Wilde makes the same ignorant error about Socrates and takes the charge against him made at his trial—as a result of which he was condemned to death—of having ‘ corrupted youth ’ to mean that he corrupted youth in the same sense that the active homosexualist does so. This of course is an ignorant

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mistake. Socrates was accused ‘*quod corrumperit juventutem*,’ but the alleged corruption to which the charge refers consisted in Socrates’s damning exposure of the absurdity and immorality of Greek religious beliefs about the Olympian gods and goddesses. So far from corrupting the youth of Athens in a bad sense, he preached the highest purity, altruism and asceticism to them. All the same, in the course of his discussion on the subject he, incidentally and accidentally, reveals that homosexuality was rampant in Athens and that it was not regarded with any great disapproval, though admitted by the highest minds to be undesirable.

Oscar went to Italy after his Greek journey with Mahaffy came to end. He was enchanted with Italy, and in Rome he got very near to Catholicism. Mr. Brasol very rightly says in his book from which I have already quoted several passages: ‘So far, little attention has been paid by the biographers to Wilde’s interest in Catholicism (Mr. Brasol had not read my *Without Apology* in which I dealt at length with the subject when he wrote this) and to his aversion to Protestantism.’ He then quotes another letter from Oscar to his young friend ‘Kitten’ in which he writes about an ‘unpleasant surprise’ contained in the will of one of his uncles:

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‘ He leaves my father’s hospital about one thousand pounds, my brother two thousand pounds, and me one hundred pounds on condition of my being a Protestant! He was, poor fellow, bigotedly ignorant of the Catholics, and, seeing me on the brink, struck me out of his will. It is a terrible disappointment to me; you see I suffer a good deal from my Romish leanings, in pocket and mind. My father had given him a share in my fishing lodge in Connemara, which of course ought to have reverted to me on his death; well, even this I lose if I “ become a Roman Catholic for five years ”—which is very infamous. Fancy a man going before God and the Eternal silence with his wretched Protestant prejudices and bigotry still clinging to him.’

This letter is exceedingly valuable, supplying as it does overwhelming evidence, in Oscar’s own hand, of all that Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair related in his last book of the near approach of the poet to Catholicism. But it was not to be. The religious fervour waned, in spite of a number of Sonnets and other poems steeped in Catholic sentiment; Greece prevailed over Rome; the lure of paganism proved stronger than the urge of Christianity. About this time, too, as the Abbot points out, Oscar became very friendly with Lord Ronald Sutherland-Gower, brother of the late Duke

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of Sutherland, a cultivated, if somewhat unpleasant, man who had the worst possible influence on him in every way, and who did everything he could to turn him against Catholicism.

Poor Oscar returned unconverted to England, and later indulged in a sonnet whose first line (unconsciously funny) runs: ‘The English Thames is holier far than Rome’! One cannot avoid the thought that if he had only written this sonnet before his uncle died he might have got two thousand pounds and the reversion of the fishing lodge in Connemara. But no doubt this is just an example of what Shakespeare had in his mind when he, perhaps unconsciously, expressed a very Catholic sentiment in the words: ‘So find we profit by losing of our prayers.’

From the Catholic point of view (which is of course my point of view and the right one) to lose two thousand pounds and a fishing lodge for the sake of the Faith is a high privilege and may count heavily in the ultimate process of saving one’s soul.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Oscar left Oxford in 1878 (his father Sir William Wilde having died in 1876) and went to London to seek his fortune he was, according to his biographer Robert Sherard, a very poor man. Sherard writes: ‘ During his early years in London Oscar Wilde did not live with his mother and Willy. He occupied lodgings in unfashionable districts. For some months he lived in a couple of furnished rooms in Salisbury Street, off the Strand. . . . It was not till later that he moved to Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, which was his address during the last period of his bachelor days. His income was a very small one, and the struggle to figure as a man of the world was constant. By mortgaging and selling his property in Ireland, by the help of friends and by anonymous literary work, he was just able to maintain himself.’

Sherard puts his income down as two hundred a year; and even if one takes into account that two hundred a year in the eighteen-seventies and 'eighties was equal to quite double that amount to-day, it certainly seems difficult to imagine how he contrived to keep going and to support the *train de vie* which he adopted. For he walked right into London

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society really from the first. He was on terms of friendship with a number of ‘highly placed’ persons whose acquaintance or friendship he had obtained at Magdalen. For example, he was on terms of intimacy with the Duke of Newcastle and stayed at Clumber on various occasions. One has only to read Abbot Sir David Hunter Blair’s account of him to realise that Oscar had the entrée to the best society from the first moment of his appearance in London after leaving Oxford. The Abbot himself, a baronet and a man of considerable wealth till he handed over his worldly goods and his fine place in Scotland to his brother and became a Benedictine monk, was a man who in the course of his life was known to and a friend of a perfect galaxy of ‘nobility and gentry.’ To be an intimate friend of Hunter Blair would alone have been a sufficient passport to what the French used to call—and no doubt still call—‘*Le High-life.*’ This being so, and considering that Oscar had by this time started wearing his ‘aesthetic costume’ (following his appearance at a ball given by Mrs. George Morrell, at Headington Hill Hall, near Oxford, where he appeared magnificently attired as Prince Rupert) it becomes difficult to believe that Mr. Sherard has not under-rated his income. His tailor’s bill alone must have been a considerable item. Probably he made more

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money than Sherard thinks. He was writing all the time and did a lot of journalism. Anyhow, whatever his income was, we know that he did succeed in living and moving very gloriously on it (we find him, for instance, dining with Christopher Sykes to meet the Prince of Wales), and it is the fact that he never once got into serious financial difficulties all through his life until he was hurled into prison and had his house and furniture sold up after his defeat in the law courts and actually before his conviction.

During all the years beginning from his first arrival in London down to the time when he at last began to make a lot of money by his plays, he lived the life of a very hard-working man. Incredibly mean and spiteful attacks on him in *Punch* continued during the whole of that period ‘without any mitigation or remorse.’ Everything that rancour and spite and dull stupidity could do to belittle him and ‘hold him up to contempt and ridicule’ as the legal phrase goes, was done by the mediocre satellites of the “Old Gentleman with the hump” whose names are now mostly forgotten. Looking back at it now, it really seems incredible that such a *barrage* of continual and venomous insult to a great man who was, even at his worst, a poet and a fine writer, could have been carried on for such a lengthy period with complete

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impunity. If, instead of bringing an action for libel against my father for accusing him of what he could not really deny, Oscar had years before issued a writ for libel on the proprietors of *Punch*, the whole course of history might have been changed. He could not have failed to get enormous damages. Everything that causes damages for libel to rise to fantastic figures was there. What chiefly sends up damages in a libel suit is evidence of malice, and of this there was, metaphorically speaking, enough to sink a battleship.

It says an enormous deal for the good nature and self-control of Wilde that during all those years when he was fighting a hard battle to earn his living without climbing down an inch from his attitude as the apostle of beauty in the home and the enemy of ugliness and vulgarity and stupidity, he never appears to have lost his temper. He treated his enemies with smiling contempt. When Whistler started his ill-tempered and spiteful attacks on him he retaliated only in the most kindly and genial way; and concerning this same Whistler, who began by being Wilde's friend and then turned into his enemy without the slightest cause or reason, I will allow myself to quote from my own book *Without Apology*. What I wrote was evoked by an example of what I called 'an aggravated form of detraction which

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consists of quoting Wilde's own sayings and attributing them to someone else as having been used against him.' The particular instance of this which I gave was that of the writer of a quite recent article in a daily paper who informed his readers that Whistler had said of Oscar Wilde, 'he is a man who has no enemies but is thoroughly disliked by his friends.' I commented in *Without Apology* as follows:

'The words attributed to Whistler were actually written by Wilde himself in his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Chapter XV, p. 2) where they are applied to an imaginary "Ernest Harrowden" who was "one of those middle-aged mediocrities so common in London clubs who have no enemies but are thoroughly disliked by their friends" . . . This attributing to Whistler of things that Wilde said is one of the standing dishes served up from time to time by persons who deal in second or third-hand humour. The truth is that while there are a mass of really witty and brilliant sayings recorded of Wilde, most of which are actually printed and published in his own books and plays, Whistler has left no record of anything more mildly witty than his *Ten o'clock* and the ill-tempered self-damnatory *The Baronet and the Butterfly*. To compare Whistler with Wilde as a wit or a conversationalist is like comparing Mr. Beverley Nichols to Doctor Johnson,

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though to do him justice I would say that Mr. Nichols is quite as witty as Whistler ever was and much less ill-natured.'

I now regret that I pitched on Mr. Beverley Nichols in this paragraph in *Without Apology*, which was written more than two years ago. I would not at the present day wish to appear to say anything whatever against Mr. Nichols, who is a remarkable instance of a man who has had the great courage to disavow his early heresies and to come out strongly on what he believes to be the side of righteousness. Mr. Nichols has always been witty and amusing, but he has lately discovered that he can be just as witty and amusing on the side of the angels as he was (not on their side) before he changed his views. Consequently I now have a great respect for him, and though what I said about him, which I have just quoted from *Without Apology*, was certainly not intended to be offensive, it might be construed into carrying some sort of slur which I wish to repudiate.

As I have made allusion to the mean and spiteful attacks on Oscar Wilde which disfigured the pages of *Punch*, I may here quote an example from its issue of December 10th, 1881. It refers to the production in America of Oscar's play *Vera* (a very bad play as the author himself subsequently freely admitted). It was produced in New York, very inadequately

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mounted and very badly acted' by inferior players. Not that I think that any acting or production would have saved the play. This is what *Punch* had to say about it when its production in London at the Adelphi Theatre was cancelled: 'The production of Mr. Oscar Wilde's play *Vera* is deferred. Naturally no one would expect a veerer to be at all certain; it must be, like a pretendedly infallible forecast, so very weathercocky. *Vera* is about Nihilism; this looks as if there were nothing in it. But why did Mr. O. Wilde select the Adelphi for his first appearance as a dramatic author, in which career we wish him cordially all the success he may deserve? Why did he not select the Savoy? Surely where there's a Donkey Cart—we should say D'Oyly Carte—there ought to be an opportunity for an Os-car.'

This paragraph, with its execrable puns, which seem to place it as the work of Francis Burnand, and its fourth-form schoolboy rudeness and pitiful attempts at humour, is a fair sample of the sort of drivel which was turned out weekly in *Punch* in the 'Seventies and 'Eighties. One can imagine what would be the feelings of its present brilliant editor, Mr. E. V. Knox, if he were confronted with 'copy' of the calibre of that which I have quoted. *Punch* has had its ups and downs, and even if in the nature of things the Leech period must always

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remain its palmiest time, it can truly be said to be very much 'up' to-day. *Punch* has always been a very good reflector of the mentality of its age, and it was to an age which accepted as humour and wit the appalling drivel which I have just quoted that Oscar Wilde tried to deliver an aesthetic message. God help him!

I think the attitude of *Punch* (reflecting as I have said, and as I think everyone will agree it did, the spirit and the mentality of the 'upper and upper middle classes' of its age) throws a blazing light on the whole tragedy of Oscar Wilde. Wilde's crusade on behalf of beauty and his victory in the intellectual field over his half-witted detractors, who could not see an inch beyond their noses, were so complete that the present generation has no idea at all of the immense debt it owes to him. What he fought for aesthetically has now become a commonplace, and he invented a new technique of wit and humour which has nourished and fed whole generations of playwrights and humorists. Who invented 'Jeeves' I would ask? I think our great humorist Mr. P. G. Wodehouse would be the last to deny whence he evolved him. It must be observed that the insane, Caliban-like rage against Oscar Wilde typified by the *Punch* extract I have given cannot be said to have been inspired by any knowledge

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or suspicion of the moral lapses which were subsequently established against him. All those who are in a position to bear witness as to the facts on this point (I instance Bernard Shaw, who also quotes Wilde's intimate friend Carlos Blacker, and Robert Sherard) agree that until the exposure took place nobody (outside avowedly homosexual circles) had any inkling of those moral lapses. This is what Mr. Shaw says about it: 'I was ordinarily acquainted with Wilde's reputation; but until he prosecuted Queensberry I had never heard a word about his homosexuality.' The late Carlos Blacker, an intimate friend of Wilde's who lent me a typescript of *De Profundis* when the last half of it was still kept secret, told me that he had not had the faintest suspicion of anything of the kind, and was as amazed as I was when it came to light. And what says Mr. Sherard himself in his first book on Wilde? 'I can disregard, in writing of him, the cruel and devilish madness, which as people said and to their satisfaction proved, at times actuated him, with all the greater ease that during sixteen years of our friendship by not one word of his, by not one gesture, by not one fleeting shadow of one evil thought, did it betray itself to me in the radiant and pleasant gentleman he was.'

So there is no doubt at all that the people who attacked Wilde so unfairly and viciously

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during the whole period of his early life in London, and even in a modified way after he had achieved his success, knew nothing against his private character. It suited them very well when the exposure took place to say, ‘There you are. Didn’t we always say he was a horrible person?’ But the fact remains that their attacks on him were not dictated by any moral consideration but simply by envy and malice and a sense of inferiority. They hated him just as their predecessors hated Shelley, not because he was an atheist but because he was a great poet.

‘From the beginning when was ought but stones

For English prophets?’

I said in an earlier chapter that Wilde was only a minor poet till he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, but I would like to explain that when I say a man is a minor poet I am not running him down. Far from it. The whole history of English literature shows that major poets are almost as rare as phoenixes. Wilde was a minor poet, but he wrote *The Sphinx* which is a terrific *tour de force* and only misses being great poetry because it is tainted with insincerity and the art-for-art’s-sake heresy, and there is nobody now living (I don’t except myself) who could write anything as good from the technical point of view. Wilde

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was a minor poet but even before he wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* he was a better poet than Yeats. In fact, as I have already said, Wilde can be ranked as a major poet on the strength of that one ballad. Moreover, I would undertake to pick twenty poems out of Wilde's script which are better than any poetry that has been written in England in the last twenty years, with perhaps half a dozen exceptions.

I don't of course judge poetry entirely by its sale, but as I pointed out in *Without Apology* the sale of poetry is certainly and indubitably one of the criterions by which one must assess it. All the best poetry has always sold, and all the 'boosting' in the world will not make people buy bad or indifferent poetry except perhaps for a very short time. Wilde's poems published by David Bogue soon after he came to London went into four editions in as many weeks, though they were attacked and abused by all the reviewers. Subsequently of course there have been countless other editions, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* went into about twenty editions within two years of its publication. This is all the more remarkable because when it was published by Leonard Smithers it was considered impossible to put the name of the author on the title page. It was not till the issue of the seventh edition, of two thousand

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copies, that Oscar Wilde's name was added. The earlier editions were printed as 'By C.C. 3' which was his number in prison.

The unfairness and sheer malice which followed Wilde through his life still pursue him now that he is dead and acclaimed as a great master everywhere outside his own ungrateful country (by which I mean England and not Ireland). Oscar lived all his life from the age of twenty in England, he was never more than mildly interested in Ireland and he was only Irish in the sense that the great Duke of Wellington and the 'Irish Peers' are so. The same of course applies to Mr. Bernard Shaw. They all belong to 'The Plantation.'

Mr. Bernard Shaw, who read this book in the type-script, takes exception to this, and wrote to me as follows 'Ireland is *all* plantation ; Macaulay's notion that the planted Irishman is English is as absurd as the notion that the planted Englishman is a Norman-Frenchman.'

All the same, with respect, as counsel says to a judge, I stick to what I have written. I differentiate between the real native Irish, the O'Briens, the O'Connors and so forth, and the planted Irishmen such as the Irish Peers. The native Irish I believe to be of two races, the Milesian and the Attacotic ; the planted Irishman in Ireland belongs to neither of

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these categories. Oscar Wilde for example was, as related in this book, the great-grandson of a Durham business man. Bernard Shaw's aristocratic ancestors came from Scotland in the seventeenth century. My own grandfather on my mother's side was Alfred Montgomery. He descended from a younger son of the Scottish Earls of Eglinton, who went to Ireland. My grandfather's family, who became baronets, lived in Ireland for about a hundred and fifty years, but my grandfather was born in England, his mother being English, and neither he himself nor anyone else that I have heard of ever suggested that he was Irish. It is one thing to say that the Normans in England, nine hundred years after the Norman conquest, can no longer be regarded as Norman-French (though strictly speaking half the real aristocracy in England is still Norman-French) but it is quite another thing to say, as Shaw does, that any English or Scottish family which goes to Ireland and remains there on and off for a couple of hundred years becomes Irish. I deny this altogether. I see nothing 'absurd' in differentiating between the real native Irish, whether Milesian or Attacotic, and the planted Englishman or Scotsman who remains, to my mind, English or Scotch, just as I remain Scotch, from a thousand years of Scottish ancestry, though my mother was half English, and though I have

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lived nearly all my life, since I was a child, in England.

While I am about it I may as well quote *verbatim* from Mr. Bernard Shaw's letter on this and other points, which are of interest. I do not reply to Shaw's remarks, which means that I more or less agree with them though I do not altogether accept his statement that it was about himself (Shaw) that Wilde made his celebrated remark about the man who had no enemies but was cordially disliked by his friends. As I have already pointed out, this epigram occurs in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But, of course, if Shaw likes to think that Wilde originally said it about him, there is no reason at all why he should be denied the satisfaction of claiming it, though honestly it seems to me to be peculiarly inappropriate to Shaw who has a host of devoted friends and also, I should say, a large number of enemies. At any rate he had plenty of enemies at the time Wilde made the remark in the nineties. I give Shaw's own words as follows :

'Wilde's court costume was quite becoming ; and you should not ignore the genuine aestheticism of his motive in adopting it on the platform. I don't think he ever wore it in the street. [Mr. Shaw is mistaken.] I did not dislike Wilde ; and I don't think he disliked me, though it was of me that he said " Shaw

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hasn't an enemy in the world ; and none of his friends likes him." This was true ; and so good that he used it several times of several people.

He did not exaggerate his mother's social importance *in Dublin*. You don't understand Ireland and Irishmen. Ireland is *all* plantation ; Macaulay's notion that the planted Irishman is English is as absurd as the notion, that the planted Englishman is a Norman-Frenchman.'

One might write a book on this subject, and no doubt books have been written about it. I don't profess to have read them, and I don't pretend to be scientific about it. But I take it that there is at least a good deal to be said for Macaulay's contention, and it agrees with my own observation, as far as that goes. Generally speaking, I would say that it would take a great deal longer than two or three hundred years of a family's residence in Ireland to turn an Englishman or a Scotsman into an Irishman. Surely, on the whole, it is blood and not local habitation which decides a man's race, though I would not deny that a lapse of not less than five hundred years might be taken into consideration in such regards. There is also, of course, the question of marriage with the natives of the adopted country to be considered. Some of Oscar Wilde's ancestors after they came to Ireland may have married native

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Irish women who were outside the plantation. If so that would make Oscar partly Irish. But I maintain that he was much more English than Irish, and his culture was almost pure Oxford.

CHAPTER VIII

IT would be impossible in the limited space at my disposal in this book to give anything like a full account of Oscar Wilde's activities in his first years in London. He had his success as a poet, he wrote a lot of anonymous journalism, including book-reviewing, and he went about giving lectures. As has already been shown he had very little money, and he tried to augment his income by writing a play *Vera, or the Nihilists*. It ought to encourage anyone who tries to write a play to read *Vera, or the Nihilists* and to remember that the man who wrote this preposterous rubbish produced, a few years later, those four masterpieces : *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The play *Vera* was produced in New York, where it was a complete failure, and it was announced as to be produced at the Adelphi Theatre in London, but it was mercifully withdrawn and was never presented. Wilde himself wrote as follows about it at the time: 'I have tried to express within the limits of art that Titan cry of the peoples for liberty which in Europe to-day is threatening thrones and making governments unstable from

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Spain to Russia and from North to Southern seas. . . . It deals with . . . the modern Nihilistic Russia with all the terror of its tyranny and the marvel of its martyrdoms.'

Mr. Boris Brasol, whose book on Wilde I have already quoted, is a Russian and had an official post under the Imperial Russian Government from 1910 to 1916. He also served as a lieutenant in the Imperial Russian Guard. So he is particularly well qualified to deal with the absurdities of *Vera, or the Nihilists*, which is supposed to represent the period about 1800. He does so in a very amusing way. One example will suffice. Wilde makes the Czar scolding his officers say, 'I banish you for your bad jokes. *Bon voyage, Messieurs!* If you value your lives you will catch the first train to Paris.'

In 1800, of course, as Mr. Brasol points out, there were no trains to catch in Russia or anywhere else!

Wilde as a social reformer was merely laughable, and in this connection it surprises me very much to read what Mr. Sherard says about Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which belongs to a much later date. Sherard, at the time he wrote his 'Life' of Wilde, more than thirty years ago, apparently admired it very much. Frankly, I think it is the worst

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thing Oscar ever wrote with the exception of *Vera*. It seems to me to be the most feeble and paltry and insincere stuff. I should expect to find that by this time Sherard has revised his opinion of it, and probably he has done so, though I gather from reading Sherard's books that he is by way of being a Socialist. This again is a great surprise to me. I knew Sherard fairly well for a short time in the 'Nineties, and I have seen a good deal of him again during the last three or four years—after a long interval when we were, more or less, 'enemies.' In fact we are on terms of great friendship. He is no more my idea of a Socialist than Wilde was. If I had not his own word for it I would refuse to believe that he was ever anything of the kind. He always gave me the impression that he was an aristocrat of the aristocrats (he is descended, albeit on the wrong side of the blanket, from the Earls of Harborough) and a Tory. His intense sympathy for the poor and down-trodden (which I share with him) is much more typical, whether he knows it or not, of the aristocrat than of the socialist.

Words nowadays are misused in the most hopeless fashion. I am sick and tired of being told that a man who is kind and generous and genial and mixes without pose or awkwardness with all classes is a 'good democrat.' 'Good democrats' are not a bit like that. The qualities

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I have enumerated are typical not of the democrat but of his opposite, the aristocrat. Stalin is a typical democrat and so was Lenin. Hitler is another. Both Bolshevism and Hitlerism are the fruits of Democracy. One would have imagined that all the fearful bunk about the Great War of 1914-18 having been fought to ‘make the world safe for democracy’ was now exploded and obsolete (even Mr. Bernard Shaw, who calls himself a Socialist, has lately done a good deal to expose the fraud of ‘democracy’) but this is far from being the case. We are still constantly being told in the papers that King George is a ‘democratic King’ which, thank God, is just exactly what he is not and never will be. We are also continually hearing that Great Britain is a democracy, whereas (thank God again) it is nothing of the kind, but is a constitutional monarchy largely governed by permanent officials and the Privy Council.

Wilde was always kind and generous, and his sympathies were always with the ‘under-dog,’ but he took very little serious interest in politics. Most half-baked young men at Oxford, even in Wilde’s day and in my own time there, began by calling themselves Socialists (nowadays they are parlour ‘Communists’) and Wilde was doubtless no exception to the general rule. After he left Oxford he immersed himself

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in literature and ‘society life.’ He never bothered his head about politics. When I knew him he was supposed to be a ‘Liberal,’ but I very much doubt whether he ever took the trouble to vote at an election. He had no interest whatever in social questions. The main idea of *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is that science and machinery, of neither of which had Wilde any knowledge whatsoever, would ultimately solve all the problems of poverty. In the case of this unfortunate pamphlet Wilde’s sense of humour deserted him as completely and as disastrously as it did in *Vera, or the Nihilists* and his other ‘dud’ play *The Duchess of Padua*—to do it justice it is much better than *Vera*.

It was at a moment when Oscar’s financial prospects were far from rosy and when he really seemed to have got into an *impasse*, that he suddenly received a cable dated September 30th, 1881, from New York from Colonel W. F. Morse, business Manager of Richard D’Oyley Carte, which was as follows: ‘Responsible agent asks me to enquire if you will consider offer he makes for fifty readings beginning November 1st. This is confidential. Answer.’ Wilde replied, ‘Yes, if offer good.’ Shortly afterwards he sailed for New York and began his series of lectures throughout the United States.

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This offer of a lecture tour in America was really largely the result of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *Patience* which was running to crowded houses at that time. Designed to hold Oscar up to ridicule it really simply advertised him, and was the cause of his successful tour in America which brought him in quite a lot of money and enabled him to start an epoch of material prosperity which never declined, and ultimately enormously increased, right up to the time of his crash in 1895. He said in a statement issued when he first got to New York, referring to the London production of *Patience*: ‘We attended at the opening night and had all manner of fun. I had arrived at what I sincerely believed to be the truth in these matters, and the praise or blame of the public was to me a matter of no importance.’

He did not in the least object to *Patience*, whose satire lacked the clumsy malice of the attacks on him in *Punch*. On his arrival in New York at his first lecture he said to his audience: ‘You have listened to the charming music of Mr. Sullivan and the clever satire of Mr. Gilbert for three hundred nights, and I am sure it is not too much to ask you, having given so much time to satire, to listen to the truth for one evening.’

His career in the United States as a lecturer was one long triumphant success, in spite of a

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good deal of attack and abuse from the newspapers. Oscar Wilde was a born speaker. He had the most beautiful voice and an attractive personality. His theme was art in poetry and dress, ‘the secret of life’ and the ‘correlation of all the arts’; but whatever it had been his success would probably have been as great. He was one of those men, one in a million, who had the gift of persuasive speech in an overwhelming degree. Even if he had talked nonsense he would have ‘put it across,’ but as a matter of fact his discourses were informed with essential truth and founded on real knowledge and scholarship and erudition. He really talked rather ‘over the heads’ of most of his American audiences, but he did it with such superlative charm and grace that he captured even the hostile and the ranks of Philistia. The attempts to run him down as a ridiculous *poseur*, made by the dull journalists of the *New York Times*, *The Tribune* and other papers, utterly failed. It is no good telling the public that a man is a ridiculous, posing ass, when the public can see for itself that he is the exact opposite. His success was chiefly due to the ‘hit’ he made with women. He was lionised by the ladies of society and, though he had a few setbacks and unpleasant episodes to contend with, on the whole he went from triumph to triumph till he returned to England with his pockets

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full of money. The fact that his theories about art and painting and literature were largely derived from Walter Pater, from Ruskin, and from Whistler is nothing whatever against him. We all derive our views about art largely from the writings or conversation of others, and all real poets imitate their predecessors, more or less. Messrs. T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden may be taken as examples of the results that follow when they cease to do so. Wilde's detractors seem to think that when they have proved that he elaborated the views of those whom he accepted as masters they have proved something against him. What nonsense this is. For what purpose except to propagate them did Ruskin or the others named give forth their views ? If I choose to enunciate a truth, must I be scornfully rebuked because I am merely putting into different language or elaborating something which has already been given to the world by a master mind ? Wilde never denied his debt to Ruskin or Pater or even to Whistler. In an interview with a New York reporter he said: 'Very many of my theories are, if I may say so, Ruskin's theories developed.'

Later he used these words about Ruskin: 'Master indeed of the knowledge of all noble living and of the wisdom of Spiritual things will he ever be to us, seeing that it was he who by

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the magic of his presence and the music of his lips taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the secret of Hellenism.'

Oscar's complete fearlessness and his superb sense of humour served him well all through his American tour. In a letter to a friend he tells of his experiences at Leadville, a town which had the reputation of being 'the toughest city in the world' where every man carried a revolver. Oscar wrote: 'I was told that if I went there they would be sure to shoot me or my travelling manager. I wrote and told them that nothing they could do to my travelling manager would intimidate me.'

He went to Leadville and had an enormous success.

In an interval between lectures he went down a mine and opened a new shaft named 'The Oscar,' and he made a tremendous hit with the miners who called him 'a bully boy with no glass eye.' He entranced the miners with a lecture on Benvenuto Cellini, who, in addition to being a great sculptor and an exquisite craftsman in gold and silver and ivory and jewels, was obviously the spiritual ancestor of the 'gangster' whose subsequent usurpation of the American stage is probably the most remarkable contribution to the evolution of types that America has ever made.

Oscar returned to Europe from America at

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the end of 1882, arriving at Liverpool on January 6th, 1883. From this time he definitely abandoned his aesthetic costume.

After a short stay in Paris, where he met Robert Sherard for the first time and had a minor success among French men of letters including Edmond de Goncourt and Victor Hugo, he returned to London, and in June of the same year he arranged with Colonel Morse for a lecture tour through England and Scotland, which he duly carried out with considerable success.

In November he became engaged to Miss Constance Lloyd the only daughter of Horace Lloyd, Q.C. It was a marriage of deep love and affection on both sides. Mrs. Wilde brought a considerable accretion of income to the *ménage*. Oscar's earning powers had increased, he was making a fair income and his American tour had brought in quite a lot of money. The young couple when they set up house at 16 Tite Street, Chelsea, were quite comfortably well off. Two sons were born of the marriage. The elder boy Cyril was killed in the Great War of 1914-18 and the younger Vyvyan still survives.

By the time I met Oscar and his wife for the first time, which, as far as I can place it, must have been in the summer of 1891, they had been married for eight years and were still on terms

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of great affection. That Oscar adored his wife is proved by a number of letters, many of which will no doubt be printed when my friend Mr. A. J. A. Symons brings out his ‘Life’ of Wilde, on which he has been engaged for the last two or three years. Mrs. Wilde was equally devoted to her husband.

While it is true that for a year or two before the final catastrophe there had been a certain amount of estrangement between them, the marriage survived quite as well as nine marriages out of ten do. Sherard’s explanation of what first caused a cooling off of the relations between Oscar and his wife, a sweet, gentle and exceedingly pretty girl, is one which I cannot accept. Sherard makes statements about a malady which he declares Wilde had contracted, but I fail to find that he gives any proof or evidence of this. I am in no position to disprove what he says, but frankly I do not believe it. In any case I am not going to discuss the marriage more than I have already done in previous books. All I can say is that it failed to survive the ultimate test, and much as I liked and admired Mrs. Wilde and much as I feel for her cruel fate and sympathise with the appalling ordeal which my father’s insane and terrible action brought upon her, I cannot but think that in the long run she did not do what she should have done.

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‘ Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds.’

There have been many wives, as I have good reason to know, who have stuck to their husbands through thick and thin and ‘ borne it out even to the crack of doom.’ Mrs. Wilde, alas, was not one of them. I quote here what I wrote in my *Autobiography* (1929): ‘ I was always on the best of terms with Mrs. Wilde. I liked her and she liked me. She told me, about a year after I first met her, that she liked me better than any of Oscar’s friends. She frequently came to my mother’s house in Cadogan Place and was present at a dance which my mother gave during the first year of my acquaintance with her husband. After the *débâcle* I never saw her again. The last time I saw her was two nights before the proceedings taken by Oscar Wilde against my father at the Old Bailey, when we all three had dinner in a restaurant and went on to a box at the St. James’s Theatre where Oscar’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was running to crowded houses. She was very much agitated, and when I said good night to her at the door of the theatre she had tears in her eyes. . . . Honesty compels me to say that Oscar during the time I knew him was not always very kind to his wife. He certainly had been (as he often told me) very much in love with her, and the

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marriage was purely a love match. At the time when I first met him he was still fond of her, but he was often impatient with her, and sometimes snubbed her, and he resented, and showed that he resented, the attitude of slight disapproval which she often adopted towards him. Towards the end of the time before the catastrophe (and they never met again after he came out of prison) the relations between them were distinctly strained. To try to make out that this had anything whatever to do with me is simply dishonest and untruthful. Those who know the facts (and there are many now living who do know them) will, if they tell the truth, bear witness that I was never a ‘bone of contention’ between Oscar and his wife, though I once used that very phrase in a jocular way in a letter to Ross which was used against me at the Ransome trial.

I hate appearing to attack Mrs. Wilde, whom I liked and admired and respected, but as I am writing this book more as a defence of Oscar than anything else (and the real truth about the whole thing which I am trying to tell is largely a defence of him) I am obliged to say that I think that Mrs. Wilde in the long run let him down rather badly. Here follows what I wrote on this subject in my book *Without Apology* (1938): ‘As to his wife, he married her solely for love, and if she had treated him

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properly and stuck to him after he had been in prison, as a really good wife would have done, he would have gone on loving her to the end of his life. I always liked Mrs. Wilde and she liked me, though I never saw her again after the catastrophe. She was a charming, pathetic and pretty little thing. Obviously she suffered a great deal and deserves every sympathy, but she fell woefully short of the height to which she might have risen, and while I feel deeply for her I cannot but blame her for the attitude she took up after his conviction. She was far from generous to him in the matter of money, and apart from that, she wrote to him a letter which he received very soon after he came out of prison which was calculated, as she must have known perfectly well (knowing his character as she did), to exasperate and embitter him, and to make impossible the reunion which she professed to desire. She offered to "take him back" on certain conditions. Oscar did not show me the letter (I did not see him for the first time since his imprisonment till some time after he received it), but he told me that her "conditions" were insulting, and he turned pale and trembled with anger when he spoke to me about her letter.

That letter finished all chance of reconciliation and finally killed all that was left of his love for her. In his *De Profundis* letter he

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praises her kindness and nobility; at my expense, of course, since what he wrote was in his letter to me which was full of reproaches and abuse. Yet it was the abused and be-rated friend and not the "kind and noble" wife who stuck to him and would not be driven away even by his own abuse and railing. If Oscar had accepted her conditions (one of which was that he was never to see me) there is no doubt that our reunion at Naples would not have taken place and I would probably never have seen him again. From my point of view, looking at it in the purely material aspect, this would have been enormously to my advantage. My father had more than once offered to "forgive" me and give me back the substantial allowance of which he had deprived me, if I would give up Wilde. The reprobating and hostile attitude of "Society" in general and King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, in particular towards me was greatly accentuated when it became known that I had resumed my friendship with him at Naples. So that if Mrs. Wilde (whether merely because she had no tact or because she deliberately imposed conditions which she knew he would not accept) had not made it impossible for him to rejoin her, I would certainly not have been able even if I had wished it (which I was very far from doing) to stand in their way.

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I have long got past the stage in which I consider that I have anything to defend or apologise for in my conduct to and about Wilde after his release from prison. The plain truth is that if I had been the Archangel Gabriel I could not possibly have acted better towards him than I did. I gave everything and received nothing, except abuse from his *soi-disant* friends. People who do not approve of what I did are welcome to do the other thing. I care no more now than I did at the time. I am not defending myself, I require no defence; I am defending Oscar and trying to show that it was no fault of his that there was no reunion with his wife. The blame for this rests entirely on Mrs. Wilde. It was not till after she had written the letter to him to which I have referred that he seriously considered the idea of coming to stay with me at Naples, and I only asked him to come then because I knew that he had nowhere else to go and that I was the only person in the world who had the pluck to take him in.

The cruelty of the world was then what it always is and always will be. I was the only person in the world who wanted him, out of pure friendship and compassion, and the world, having driven him out of every other refuge, proceeded to smoke him out of this last asylum also.

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The prime mover in all this intrigue to separate us was Robert Ross. He was, in this, as in everything else connected with Wilde, the villain of the piece. I believe this fact will emerge more clearly when Mr. A. J. A. Symons publishes his book on Wilde which is due very soon, and which will contain a number of Wilde's hitherto unpublished letters most of which I myself have never read.'

That concludes the extracts from my previous books and it is all that I propose to say about Oscar's marriage which, beginning under such smiling auspices, was doomed to end so cruelly and pitifully.

Mrs. Wilde died in Genoa while she was staying for a long visit with the late Margaret, Ranee of Sarawak, sister of my great friend Harry de Windt. The Ranee had a villa near Genoa and invited Mrs. Wilde to come there and stay as long as she would. One day Mrs. Wilde went to Genoa on private business and did not return. It was not till some days later that the Ranee was notified of her sudden death which took place in an hotel in Genoa. I had these details from Harry de Windt. Oscar told me in Paris (he was then staying at the Hotel d'Alsace) that on the night she died (as he subsequently ascertained) he was tormented by sad dreams about her and that he woke crying. He said: 'I dreamed she came here to see me and

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I kept on saying “ Go away, go away, leave me in peace ”.

There is not much ‘ detergent fun ’ to be extracted from this dreadful tragedy, and precious little consolation from any other source, unless it be from a kind of ghost of an echo of Le Beau’s words to Orlando in *As You Like It*:

‘ Hereafter in a better world than this. . . .’

CHAPTER IX

AFTER his marriage Oscar Wilde continued his life of strenuous literary and social activity. He was known in society as well as in literary and Bohemian circles as a brilliant talker and a wit, and in addition to becoming editor of the *Woman's World* (a job he took on, much against the grain, simply because his salary as editor increased his income) he wrote a number of anonymous articles and reviews in the papers and in various periodicals. He became editor of the *Woman's World* in 1888, but meanwhile he had produced a volume of fairy tales called *The Happy Prince*. These fairy tales were undoubtedly and admittedly imitations of Hans Andersen, but that is nothing against them, for the same can be said of most fairy tales that have been written in the last eighty years. Why should not a man imitate the best models? Oscar, just as in his poems he had frankly imitated the great poets, particularly Tennyson, with considerable skill and success, took Hans Andersen as his model in his *Happy Prince* with an even greater mastery of his medium. *The Happy Prince* is a beautiful book and it remains a minor classic, eclipsed indeed, later on, by the more sophisticated, ambitious and

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polished *The House of Pomegranates*, which contains some of the most musical and perfect prose ever written in the English language. *The House of Pomegranates* might also almost be described as a book of fairy stories, but the imitation of Hans Andersen no longer obtains. The book is not imitated from anyone. It is a work of original genius, and just as it imitates no other writer so it has had no successors, as far as I know, in its *genre*. It was beautifully illustrated by Ricketts and Shannon.

In 1890 Oscar wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the only book of his which might be described as a novel or a romance. It is a work of great genius and power. It is the story of a beautiful and supremely fortunate youth who, by a furious act of will, sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the gift of long enduring youth and beauty. His portrait at the age of twenty, painted by his friend Basil Halward, becomes the visible symbol of his conscience which by a wicked life he gradually destroys. The picture falls into decay and corruption while he himself remains young and lovely. It is in my opinion the best book of its kind that has ever been written. It has a sort of superficial resemblance, in its supernatural element, to Balzac's story *La Peau de Chagrin*, but whereas Balzac's story makes a magnificent start and then peters out to a tedious and unconvincing end which really

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fails to reach any satisfactory culmination or point any moral, Wilde's story has all the terrible and fatal force of an eternal allegory of the soul of man. The book was attacked (everything that Wilde wrote was always attacked) as immoral, whereas to those who read it rightly it conveys a great and august moral lesson. I once myself, in the witness-box, described it as an immoral book: I said that while on the surface it was a moral story it had about it an undercurrent of corruption and evil which made it a wicked book. I said this out of the bitterness of my heart, at a time when I was under the influence of a feeling of great indignation and resentment, caused by the discovery, which I had then only just made, that Wilde had attacked me (most unjustly, and really, as I now feel, quite idiotically) in the letter he wrote to me in prison which he entrusted to Robert Ross to give to me but of which Ross concealed all knowledge from me till twelve years after Wilde's death. My criticism, made at that time, as I have said, in the witness-box, was not fair, because the 'undercurrent of corruption and evil' in the book is part of the entirely legitimate atmosphere created by the author for the purpose of his story. The book was violently attacked by Henley, among others. On the other hand it was reviewed and highly praised by Walter

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Pater, an historical fact which ought not to have been forgotten by the writer of a recent article on the occasion of Pater's centenary in the *Times Literary Supplement* which contained an impertinent sneer at Wilde's masterpiece which would have roused Pater's indignation and resentment.

Here is a passage from the book giving an indication of its style. The young Dorian Gray is reading a book sent to him by his evil genius, Lord Henry Wootton: I quote the passage as an example of Wilde's glowing prose and also because what Wilde says about this book (generally supposed to be *A Rebours* of Huysmans, to my mind a tedious book and the least successful book that Huysmans wrote) does in a way convey what the adverse critics of Wilde would have wished to say against *The Picture of Dorian Gray* if they had been able to do it: 'It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed. It was a novel without a plot, being, indeed, a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the

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passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century but his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself, the various moods through which the World Spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin . . . one hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confession of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows.'

But please let us remember that the book here described, the 'poisonous book,' is not Wilde's book but an unnamed book, generally supposed to be *A Rebours*, which the hero of his story is reading. Hostile critics have used Wilde's own words and applied them to himself and his work with complete unfairness. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is as different from *A Rebours* as chalk from cheese. It is so far from being 'a novel without a plot' that it has one of the

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most ingenious and well wrought plots that has ever been fashioned. The gibe at virtue and the exaltation of sin, just quoted, are in *A Rebours* and not in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which is an enthralling story in which the element of the supernatural is cunningly and delicately suggested in such a way that to the very end of the book one is never quite certain whether that element of the supernatural is supposed to have existed in reality or only in the brains of Dorian Gray and Basil Halward. After the picture is painted by Dorian Gray's friend, Basil Halward, no one ever sees it again except Dorian Gray himself right up till the scene in the book when the painter also sees it for a minute before he is murdered. Dorian Gray in a spasm of horror and remorse slashes the canvas with a knife and is found dead on the floor, old, wrinkled and hideous, with the knife in his heart, while on the wall hangs his portrait restored to all its perfect beauty.

Oscar Wilde's volume of essays *Intentions* contains an account of his theories about Art and Literature. These are set forth in dialogues as brilliant and witty as they are profound and informative. It is very difficult to describe them; one reads them with delight at the flashing wit and epigram which pour out with the utmost exuberance and effortless ease, while all the time one is conscious of an alert and well-

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informed critical intelligence which is not exploiting merely personal prejudices but is unobtrusively testifying to profound intellectual and artistic principles. The substratum of hard thought which underlies the pleasant frivolity of the dialogues is obviously derived in part from the critical theories of Matthew Arnold, but where Matthew Arnold as often as not failed to persuade his readers to think as he did, Wilde charmed them into it.

In 1892 Oscar Wilde wrote his first successful play—his previous essays in the art of play-writing having been complete failures—and called it *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Its success, when it was produced at the St. James's Theatre by George Alexander, was immediate and overwhelming. The plot is conventional, and Mr. St. John Ervine, who has a very low opinion of the play—but this brilliant critic has a blind spot about Wilde—brands it as melodramatic. Experience however teaches us that life itself is sometimes intensely melodramatic. It is nothing against a play, in my view, to say that it is melodramatic; the question is whether it is ‘good theatre’ and that is just what *Lady Windermere's Fan* is in a supreme degree. As against the opinion of Mr. St. John Ervine for whose judgment, except on the question of Oscar Wilde, I have, as everyone must have, great respect, one can

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set the opinion of William Archer who was undoubtedly the leading dramatic critic of Wilde's day. William Archer thought highly of *Lady Windermere's Fan*; Mr. St. John Ervine thinks it is beneath contempt, and I believe Mr. James Agate, another brilliant dramatic critic, has no better opinion of it. But what does it matter? Remembering that Pepys thought *The Tempest* the worst play he ever saw in his life, and recalling some of Dr. Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare, one can only be sure of one thing, namely, that the opinions of the most brilliant critics are liable to be made to appear absurd and unbelievably at fault by the simple processes of time.

I do not profess to be a dramatic critic; I am only a poet, but I do venture to think that I am a fairly good judge of the merits of any play. I saw *Lady Windermere's Fan* at least twenty times when it was first put on by George Alexander and loved every word of it every time.

Whatever Mr. St. John Ervine or Mr. Agate may think about it I shall never cease to say and believe that it is a superb comedy though undoubtedly, as a work of art, inferior to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The test will be when (within a very short time, I venture to believe) Mr. Gielgud puts it on again as brilliantly and with as fine a cast as he has done in the case of *The Importance of Being Earnest*,

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which Mr. Agate agrees with me in regarding as a masterpiece, which Mr. Shaw calls ‘ a mechanical farce ’ and of which Mr. St. John Ervine I believe has only a very poor opinion. When a play can be produced and can run to crowded and enthusiastic houses forty years after the death of its author, all the dramatic critics in the world cannot go on running it down. At least, I beg their pardons, they *can* go on running it down, just as Pepys if he were still alive to-day might go on saying that *The Tempest* was sheer rubbish (I forget his exact words and have no copy of his diary here to which I might refer) but I don’t think that they *will* go on running it down.

I think *The Importance of Being Earnest*, easily first, and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, are Wilde’s two best plays; and I think the least good is *A Woman of No Importance*, but it is redeemed by its delightful dialogue and its firework display of sparkling wit. *The Ideal Husband* is better than *A Woman of No Importance* and not so good as the other two, but it is better than any other plays (except perhaps two of Mr. Shaw’s) that have been staged since Wilde’s death. I firmly believe that in time to come these four plays will be as regularly reproduced as the plays of Sheridan, not to insist on Shakespeare, and that they will in the long run outlive all the English plays of the epoch.

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extending from the 'Nineties to the present day

Wilde's play *Salomé*, written by a remarkable *tour de force* in French, is not one for which I can profess very great admiration although I translated it, at Wilde's request, into English while I was still at Oxford. Many critics for whose judgment I have respect think highly of it, but it has never greatly appealed to me since I reached the age of intellectual discretion. Perhaps I am quite wrong. In my opinion it cannot rank with Wilde's best work any more than can the book (made up by Robert Ross out of extracts from Wilde's prison letter to me) known as *De Profundis*. My dislike of this book, which has always seemed to me to ring false and to smack of self-righteousness, hypocrisy and pharisaism, has nothing to do with the fact that it consists of expurgated extracts from a letter in which Wilde made a very unfair, and I may add a very ungrateful, attack on me. Long before I had any knowledge of any 'unpublished part' of *De Profundis* I reviewed the book for Frank Harris's paper *The Candid Friend*. I wish I had a copy of my review to print now. It was signed 'A.D.' Robert Cunningham Graham, according to what Frank Harris told me, asked Harris who was the author of the article which he said had produced a profound impression on him—and he was, Harris told me, amazed to hear that I

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had written it. (At that time, about 1905, no one had any idea about me in connection with Wilde beyond what was current as what I may call the ‘Robert Ross legend.’) I wrote the article reviewing *De Profundis* many years before I became a Catholic, so it was certainly not the many passages in the book which are bound to be revolting to any Catholic or any real Christian (the attack on chastity for example) which put me off it. I think it is a dreadful, slimy and canting book—with a few fine redeeming passages. If it had been the last thing Wilde wrote I would not even now be far from thinking that T. W. H. Crosland’s devastating *The First Stone* was the truest word ever written about it. Fortunately, however, Wilde lived to write *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a great poem and a perfect palinode to the Pecksniffian cant, smug falsity and sloppy sentiment (to say nothing about a regular cascade of split infinitives) of *De Profundis*.

The most sickening thing in connection with Wilde’s downfall and cruel fate is the conviction, amounting to a perfect moral certainty, which one is bound to have, that Wilde who was forty-one when he was hurled into prison, would have written at least a dozen plays as good as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and probably many more even better, if he had lived another twenty years. He had got to the stage when he

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could write a play with the greatest ease, and in a gust of high spirits, in two or three months. The incentive of writing given to him by the gathering volume of applause he gained, and the gradual, ever-growing discomfiture of his enemies of the press, who truly 'hated him without a cause' all through his life, would have been enough to make him write at least one play a year. But added to this incentive was the enormously strong one of the shower of gold which fell upon him as the result of his pleasant activities. In a few years he would have been a very rich man. He was already making three or four thousand pounds a year, worth at least double that amount to-day. If he had lived out his normal span of life he might have had an output equal to that of Mr. Bernard Shaw whose intellect appears to improve every year, and who, as I have told him more than once, will probably die a Catholic.

Non-Catholics always assume that when a man becomes a Catholic he surrenders his intellect to the Church. This is true only in the same sense that when (if ever) a man arrives at the stage of being perfectly reasonable, he surrenders his intellect to logic. Hence it follows that when I say that Bernard Shaw will probably die a Catholic, I am simply paying the greatest compliment to his intellect which I know how to pay.

CHAPTER X

THE four years during which my great friendship and almost daily association with Oscar Wilde endured, till it was interrupted by his imprisonment, cover a period of his most brilliant and copious literary activity. He wrote his brilliant essay in Shakespearian criticism *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, which, in the form of a somewhat fantastic story, gets very near to solving the problem of Shakespeare's sonnets, before I met him. The same applies to *Dorian Gray*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* was produced after he had known me only a very short time. I was not with him, except on isolated occasions, while he was writing it. But as in the unpublished part of his letter to me from prison, *De Profundis*, he makes the amazingly and fantastically untrue statement that I interfered with his writing and that he *never wrote anything* while I was with him, I must again put on record the fact, which is susceptible of absolute proof, that from the time our close association began till the day he died he never wrote anything at all except when I was with him; generally I was actually staying in the same house and often sitting in the same room with him while he wrote. He

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wrote the whole of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at a house in Worthing where I stayed with him, and most of it while I was sitting in the same room with him. He wrote *The Ideal Husband* partly at a house at Goring where I stayed with him and partly in rooms he took in St. James's Place where I visited him regularly every day and remained for hours with him. He wrote *A Woman of No Importance* in a house at Babbacombe lent to him by Lady Mount Temple where I stayed with him for about two months in the Long Vacation with a tutor who coached me for 'Greats' at Oxford. He wrote, or at any rate put into its final shape, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in my villa at Posilipo, and from the moment we were separated at that time, as already described in this book, till the day of his death, he never wrote another line of prose or poetry. The only thing he wrote when I was not with him (unfortunately for us both) was his *De Profundis* and even that is a long letter to me beginning 'Dear Bosie' and signed, 'Your affectionate friend Oscar Wilde.' I have already expressed my opinion of this screed, and I refer to it again simply to emphasise my point as to the mental and intellectual stimulus which I had on him, and also to show, by the amazing example I have given, the wild absurdity of the charges he brings against me in the 'unpub-

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lished part' of his letter to me which was kindly 'presented' to the British Museum by Robert Ross and which the British Museum refuses to hand over to me though plainly it is my property.

I must here explain that the authorities of the British Museum adopt the attitude, which is of course perfectly reasonable, that as they hold the MS. on trust it is not in their power to hand it over to me although it is admittedly a letter written to me, and although in 1929 in my *Autobiography*, I printed, in the Appendix of my book, an extract from a letter written by Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross from Reading Gaol, in which he says, referring to the letter to me which he had just finished writing: 'The copy done and verified from the MS. the original should be despatched to A.D. by More, and another copy done by the typewriter so that you should have a copy as well as myself.'

Ross kept the original MS. for himself, and did not even send me a copy. I saw the letter for the first time in the year 1912, twelve years after Wilde's death, when it was exhibited to me in the offices of Messrs. Lewis and Lewis, as part of the documents relating to the 'plea of justification' put in by Mr. Arthur Ransome as his defence to my action for libel. As a result of this perfidious action of Ross's, Wilde and I were at cross purposes in this regard for the

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whole of the rest of his life. He was evidently under the impression that I had read his abusive and unfair letter and that I had charitably decided not to say anything about it and simply to ignore it, which is exactly what I probably would have done if I had ever received it. I, on the other hand, knowing nothing whatever about its existence, was on several occasions puzzled by allusions he made to some letter or letters he had written about me in prison. He said to me once when we had a quarrel and I reproached him for his attitude towards me while he was in prison, ‘ You are surely not going to bring up against me anything I wrote about you in prison when I was starving and half out of my mind.’ I imagined that he was referring to letters which he had written to Ross, in which he attacked me, and so the complete misunderstanding went on till he died. I am convinced that he believed that Ross had carried out his instructions and given or sent me the letter and that I had thrown it into the fire, which is quite probably what I would have done if I had ever received it.

The British Museum authorities in reply to an application for the return of the MS. which was made to them by my solicitors Messrs. Carter and Bell on advice given to me and them by Lord Hailsham, who as Lord Chancellor was, ex-officio, one of the trustees, stated

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that they did not want to keep the MS. which was a source of embarrassment to them, and that they would be only too pleased to hand it over to me if they got the ruling of a judge instructing or advising them to do so, but that in the meanwhile as they had accepted the 'gift' (made by Ross!) under the terms of a trust they were, and are, powerless to part with the MS. Lord Hailsham whom I consulted and who with the greatest kindness told me to tell my solicitor to visit him at the War Office (he was at that time Minister for War) gave my solicitor his opinion that the proper course was for me to start a Chancery suit against the British Museum for the return of the MS. This he said would lead to a judicial pronouncement from the bench, and as the British Museum were not at all hostile to me, but on the contrary, perfectly ready to do what was right if they could be sure of official guidance in the matter, I would, very likely, get the MS. which he personally (Lord Hailsham) thought I ought to have. Unfortunately the cost of the legal proceedings entailed was a bar to this, and a relative of mine who at first kindly said he would bear the cost was dissuaded from taking this course by a young barrister whom he consulted who, obviously, completely failed to grasp the merits of the case and the strength of my claim as supported by Lord Hailsham. So

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I have left the matter *in statu quo*, and it will probably not occur to anyone in authority till I have been dead twenty years that a great injustice has been done to me.

I must apologise to my readers for this, perhaps tedious, digression from the main theme of my book, but it does form a part of Wilde's story and the circumstance that it raises issues entirely personal to me is my misfortune and not my fault.

CHAPTER XI

I MET Wilde for the first time in 1891 when Lionel Johnson, the Wykehamist poet, who had been with me at Winchester and with whom at Oxford I had a great friendship, took me to see him in his house 16 Tite Street, Chelsea. I was then twenty years of age. Oscar took a violent fancy—it is no exaggeration to describe it as an infatuation—to me at sight; and though at the beginning of our friendship my feeling for him was nothing like so strong as his for me, I was from the first flattered that a man as distinguished as he was should pay me so much attention and attach so much importance, as he apparently did, to all my views and preferences and whims. I adopted the attitude of *enfant gâté* with considerable delight and some amusement. And yet in the long run I think I was more devoted to him than he was to me, and my friendship for him and my loyalty never varied, even when, after he had been a year in prison, I was told that he had turned against me. I never for a moment ceased to love him and while he was in prison my whole life can be described as a continual longing to see him again.

My father, hearing of my being continually in

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Wilde's company, round about 1892, told me that he objected to my friendship with Wilde and warned me against him. At first he did not do this in an offensive way. He seemed to think that it would be quite sufficient for him to tell me he disapproved of the friendship to make me drop it at once. This was very unreasonable because he had been divorced by my sweet and lovely mother, to whom he had behaved abominably, for many years, and even before that time he had hardly ever lived at home. He was almost a stranger to me, though, as it happens, I was, till he began to attack me, devoted to him and had a tremendous opinion of his prowess as a fine horseman and an amateur champion lightweight boxer.

Mr. Bernard Shaw in his preface to the new edition of Frank Harris's *Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde* says of my father: 'He was a Scots Marquess, Earl, Viscount and Baron, with a fourfold contempt for public opinion, an ungovernable temper, and after his divorce, a maniacal hatred of his family. His chief claim to respect was that he was an outspoken free-thinker. . . . He was, when irritated, especially with his family, so foully abusive that his second son Percy was provoked to punch his head in broad daylight in Bond Street; and when the two were bound over to keep the peace in the Police Court nobody was surprised;

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for that was the sort of man the Marquess was known to be. It must be added that he and Lord Alfred were virtually strangers, a thing that happens easily in aristocratic families even when the father is not divorced. Consequently in Lord Alfred's intense dislike to his father, and in his father's inclusion of him in his feud against his family, there was nothing especially unnatural or surprising. What is both unnatural and surprising is that when Queensberry exposed and ruined Wilde by accusing him of having corrupted his son, the fact that he was ruining his son as well was curiously overlooked and has been so ever since. This may have been his real object.'

I must here interrupt Mr. Shaw with comment on two points. First, my father, when he left a card containing an insulting inscription at Wilde's club, did not accuse him of corrupting his son. Even he had not the face to do that, and he, moreover, instructed his counsel, Sir Edward Carson, in the subsequent proceedings, when Wilde charged him with criminal libel at the Old Bailey, to say that he brought no charge against Wilde which would convey any aspersion on me. It was exactly this which made it so imperative for Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, to call me as a witness as I urged him to do and as he solemnly promised, in consultation, to do. If I had got into the

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witness-box I would probably have saved Wilde, because in the first place, although at that time neither I myself nor anyone else knew it, I was a first-class witness (as I subsequently proved over and over again), and in the second place it would have been impossible for Carson to cross-examine me in a hostile way without exposing the hypocrisy of my father and establishing the truth of what I said about him in my *Autobiography* quoted as follows by Shaw: 'His pretended solicitude for his son and his alleged desire to save him were nothing but a hypocritical pretence, his real object being to do, what in effect he succeeded in doing, to ruin his son and finally to break the heart of his martyred wife.'

Shaw goes on: 'Certainly there was no doubt of his success. Without a particle of evidence the public rushed to the conclusion that Lord Alfred was Wilde's accomplice. . . . Unfortunately Lord Alfred was too young (twenty-four) to take in the gravity of the situation. In point of contempt for Philistine opinion, of high temper and insensate courage, he was a chip of the old block; and though he knew that the libel on his father's visiting card could be justified, he was confident that he himself if called as a witness could give such an account of his father that no jury would give a verdict in his favour. He certainly proved afterwards

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that he was a champion client in getting round juries, and more than a match for the ablest cross-examiners, and even the most prejudiced judges.'

I quote all this from Mr. Shaw's preface to *Harris*, with Mr. Shaw's consent, because it is a masterly summing up of the whole situation. If I had not myself, of my own free will, and perhaps foolishly though, I may say, with the highest and most religious motives, made certain admissions in my *Autobiography* (1929), there would not, and could not ever have been, the slightest evidence to this day of anything against Wilde in his conduct towards me. That is why I have always maintained, and shall continue to maintain, that if Sir Edward Clarke had not gone back on his solemn promise, given to me and Wilde and Wilde's solicitors in his chambers in consultation, to put me in the witness-box directly after he had opened his case, my father would never have got a verdict. Directly the jury had tumbled to the fact (as they would inevitably have done) that my father's attack on Wilde was a deliberate attempt to ruin his own son, they would have refused to give him a verdict on the plea of justification, even in face of the evidence on other matters.

The second point on which I join issue with Mr. Shaw is when he says that my father's 'chief claim to respect' was that he was an

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‘outspoken freethinker.’ It is natural that Mr. Shaw, being, as he says, a freethinker himself, should respect my father for being an outspoken votary of the same cult, and from that point of view Mr. Shaw is justified in saying that my father claims and deserves respect. But I wonder it has not occurred to him that a freethinker to be really entitled to respect should be a freethinker all through. What right has a freethinker to confine his freethinking only to the sphere of his own prejudices and predilections? My father used to go about denouncing Christianity. He publicly lectured on the platform against it, and he was practically turned out of the House of Lords on that account.—He was a Scottish Representative Peer and his fellow peers declined to re-elect him because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Queen (Victoria) which he described as ‘Christian tomfoolery.’—By all means let those who agree with him respect him if they wish, or feel constrained, to do so; but if my father is to be respected for freethinking about Christianity why should not Wilde on the same principle have been respected for his revolt against Christian morality? Freethinkers should surely respect freethinking in others, and their failure to do so, if it occurs, deprives them of the right to be respected. I believe Mr. Shaw would agree with this.

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On another point I would like to observe that it was just the fact that my father was a free-thinker which nullified his authority over me. If he had even been an ordinary respectable Victorian ‘Papa’ who lived at home with his wife (instead of flaunting his mistresses) and took his children to church on Sundays, he would, without the slightest doubt, have retained his natural parental authority over me. When I became a Catholic nearly twenty years after my father tried to ruin me—and he succeeded only too well from a worldly point of view—I submitted to authority with perfect docility. How much more easily and naturally would I have submitted to such authority in my childhood and youth if my father had not been free-thinking enough to repudiate the ‘Christian tomfoolery’ on which, and on which alone, his parental authority should have been founded?

I find that in order to explain to my readers the situation which arose between Wilde and myself and my father I must once more have recourse to Mr. Shaw. Some explanation is needed of the strange posture of affairs which forced me into the cruel position of being, just because I was as God made me, the innocent cause of the ruin of my friend (‘for each man kills the thing he loves’ as Wilde says in his great ballad). This is what Mr. Shaw says (and I quote him because it is possible for him to say

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true things about me which I could not very well say about myself): ‘It so happens that Lord Alfred Douglas in the ’twenties was gifted or cursed with the degree of personal beauty that, taking its possessor quite beyond the sphere of sex attraction, inspires affectionate admiration in men and women indiscriminately. Poets wrote sonnets praising his beauty as Shakespear [Mr. Shaw’s spelling] praised Mr. W. H.’s. Had there been a Shakespear among his acquaintances, the body of adoring verses he inspired would be as copious and as famous as the ‘sugred sonnets’ about which books have been wridden by Tyler, by Samuel Butler, by Wilde, and finally by Lord Alfred himself, who, being Mr. W. H. *redivivus*, alone understands them.’

The two hours’ traffic of our stage in this book being set for presentment, to the accompaniment of the continuance of my parent’s rage, the story’s fearful passage now moves with swift fatality to its terrible *dénouement*.

Oscar Wilde lost his case against my father; the jury, who had been allowed by Sir Edward Clarke to accept, without a word of protest, Carson’s presentment of my father in the figure of a noble, heart-broken, pathetic ‘old man’ (he was just over fifty) struggling to ‘save his beloved son’ from a dangerous friendship with a wicked corrupter of youth, found that my

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father's 'plea of justification' was established (as indeed it was established on the facts of his misdemeanours with a whole troop of juvenile accomplices). Sir Edward Clarke offered the jury no alternative account which they might accept, and simply played into the hands of my father and Carson. He then threw up the case, and cast his client to the wolves. The same day Wilde was arrested in my sitting-room at the Cadogan Hotel in Sloane Street. He was taken to Bow Street police station, whither I followed an hour later in a cab and tried to 'bail him out,' of course without success; and thereafter he was committed for trial and confined 'on remand' in Holloway Gaol where I visited him daily for about three weeks. The day before his trial came on at the Old Bailey I left the country and went to France because Wilde himself, having been told by his solicitors that unless I left the country Sir Edward Clarke would throw up his defence, told me to go. Then followed the two trials with whose sordid details I have no intention of dealing. If I had been called as a witness even at this late hour I might have saved him. I sent a telegram to Clarke from Calais imploring him to call me and offering to return at an hour's notice, but the only reply I got was a 'stern rebuke' from Wilde's solicitors. The jury, as already related, disagreed at the trial before Mr. Justice

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Charles, and at the second trial, before Mr. Justice Wills, Oscar Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to two years' hard labour.

He had two plays, *The Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* running and he had been up till a week or two before the Queensberry trial a comparatively rich man. Yet the moment he was arrested he was reduced to penury and assailed by all his creditors in a body while his income simply stopped. He was of course condemned to pay all my father's costs; his wife left him; his plays ceased to bring in money (I had already actually had to give him £360 out of my own pocket to enable him to start the prosecution against my father); an execution was put into his house and his furniture and effects were sold 'for a song.' His enemies in the press gave a spirited exhibition of the fine old British sport of kicking a man when he is down, and that was the end of him for the next eighteen months—except that he was brought up 'in custody' to go through the bankruptcy court.

In his second year in prison he wrote the letter to me, *De Profundis*, which was withheld from my knowledge till twelve years after his death.

He came out of prison on May 14th, 1897, and left for Dieppe the same day.

CHAPTER XII

BEFORE leaving England for Dieppe Oscar Wilde went to the Brompton Oratory with the intention of seeing Father Sebastian Bowden, a personal friend of his—and later of mine—who had been originally an officer in the Guards. Wilde's intention was to be received into the Catholic Church. However, as it happened, Father Sebastian Bowden was away at the time and Wilde, though he could, of course, have seen another of the Oratorians, decided to postpone his reception till later. He was probably unaware that it would have taken at least six weeks' preparation before he could have been received, but if he had seen Father Bowden, this charming and persuasive man (who had abandoned the gay world he used to adorn for the self-sacrificing life of the priesthood) would, it is more than likely, have induced Wilde to act up to his pious intentions by remaining in England for 'instruction.' This might or might not have been for the best. I mean that if Wilde had become a Catholic then, it might have kept him straight when he got back eventually to Paris. On the other hand if he had become a Catholic and continued his mode of life as he subsequently did in Paris,

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his last state might have been worse than his first.

He went to Dieppe on the day of his release from prison, and a week or two later (after experiencing insults from 'the British Colony' there, with one or two brilliant exceptions) he moved to the quiet little village of Bernaval where a chalet had been taken for him out of a fund of £800 which had been subscribed for him among his friends.

In the meanwhile I had been informed that he had 'turned against me' and did not wish ever to see me again. As I had, since the last time I had seen him, the day before his trial, done nothing but 'stick to him through thick and thin,' to my own great loss and detriment and to the exasperation of my father and 'society' in general who condemned me for not abandoning him, this was, of course, very unfair and perfectly unreasonable. As I said in my *Autobiography* I am amazed now when I think of the patience and meekness with which I bore this entirely unmerited treatment from the friend for whose sake I was enduring exile and ostracism and abuse. I merely wrote and told him that I did not understand what I was supposed to have done to deserve such unkindness, and that I was longing to see him again. Within a week or two he was writing me letters in the old adoring strain,* and, after he had been

* See note at end of book.

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at Bernaval a few months and we had met on one occasion at Rouen, he joined me in a villa at Posilipo, in Naples, where he stayed between two and three months. I have already related how we were separated because my mother threatened me with the loss of my allowance if I continued to reside in the same house with him. We parted perforce, and a little later he went to Paris where he remained till he died.

In my villa at Posilipo he completed his *Ballad of Reading Gaol* which was subsequently published by Leonard Smithers and went into a great number of editions. This ballad was, as I have already said, far the best thing he ever did in poetry, and on the strength of it, and perhaps also of the long previously written poems *The Sphinx* and *The Harlot's House*, he can rank as a major poet. From the formal point of view it was modelled on Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, and it may also be said to have owed something to that fine poem of Thomas Hood's *Eugene Aram*. Both Hood and Wilde dealt with a real murderer in real life, but Wilde's poem is infinitely superior to Hood's, and aspires rather, in respect of what I should call 'class,' to the Coleridge standard, that is to say to the standard of High Poetry. Wilde's ballad has a grim realism and a fierce human interest which differentiate it from the *Ancient Mariner* in such a way as to make it difficult to compare the



Tues 7.

7.30

My own Darling Boy,

I got your

telegram half an hour

ago—and just send you

a line to say the I

feel the 's of love &

again doing beautiful

art is being with you—it

is not so in old days

but now it is. However,

you can really recreate

the energy is there & always

power in art don't depend

Everyone is furious with me

for going back to you—but they don't understand

us—I feel

LETTER WRITTEN IN 1897

Tuesday / 7.30 / My own Darling Boy, / I got your / telegram half an hour / ago—and just send you / a line to say that I / feel that my only hope of / again doing beautiful work in / Art is being with you. It / was not so in old days— / but now it is different, and / you can really recreate in me / that energy and sense / of power on which Art depends. / Everyone is furious with me / for going back to you—but they / don't understand us—I feel

that it is only with you that I can do anything at all— Do / remake my ruined life for / me—and then our friendship / and love will have a different / meaning to the world. / I wish that when we / met at Rouen we had not / parted at all. There / are such wide abysses now / of space and land between us. / But we love each other. / Goodnight-dear- / Yr Oscar.

Goodnight— dear—

Yours—

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two. Coleridge's ballad has little human interest and is the very antithesis of realism. It is a pure phantasy, and because of that, or perhaps in spite of it, is poetry of the highest order. Each poem has the defects of its qualities. I am not going to judge between them except by saying that the two poems belong to the same class, and that Wilde's poem easily holds its own with Coleridge's. The ballad was, strange to say, actually very well received in the London press. On the whole the critics were touched and moved, Henley being an odious exception. His review of the poem was carping, ungenerous and mean. The reason of this attitude being, I take it, that Henley realised that Wilde had 'pulled off' something which he (Henley) had always wanted to do but had never quite been able to achieve. Considering that Henley was one of those who had begun by being friends with Wilde and had then turned against him, on the hypocritical pretence of being 'shocked' by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it was surely in the worst possible taste for him to attack this swan song of a ruined and defeated man. I remember this phrase from his review: 'the trail of the minor poet is over it all.' If Henley could not find it in his heart to praise Wilde's ballad it would surely have been more to his credit to have written nothing about it. As it

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is, the whirligig of time has brought in its usual revenges, and the phrase coined by Henley in ungenerous denigration of his former friend now recoils on Henley himself with irresistible force. If ever there was a minor poet it was Henley. (I have already explained in this book that when I call a man a minor poet I am paying him a compliment).

Oscar Wilde spent the last three years of his life in Paris in a small hotel on the left bank of the Seine, the Hotel d'Alsace in the *rue des Beaux Arts*. Except for the miserable pittance of three pounds a week which was all his wife allowed him, he had no money at all, apart from what he made by the Ballad, and really he depended almost entirely on the generosity of friends, which did not, on the whole, fail him, though, generally speaking, it was the poor among his friends rather than the rich who helped him. Adding up together all the money he received, at various times from various sources, it cannot truthfully be pretended, as at one time it was the fashion to pretend, that he was 'left destitute.' He really got quite enough to have lived comfortably. But unfortunately he was 'quite hopeless about money.' If one gave him a hundred pounds on Monday he had generally spent it all by the following Saturday, and consequently he lived in a perpetual state of being 'desperately hard up.'

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I myself when I first came to join him in Paris after the break up of the Posilipo *ménage* was pretty much *dans la purée*, and it was not till after my father died in 1899 and I came into a certain amount of money (merely my modest younger son's portion) that I was able to help him to any considerable extent. I gave him as much as I could afford, that is to say several hundred pounds. I regret that it is not possible for me truthfully to endorse what my friend Robert Sherard says about all this question of Wilde's financial ethics and other aspects of his last years in Paris in his latest book, *George Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris And Oscar Wilde*. While I entirely agree with Sherard that Frank Harris's *Life And Confessions of Oscar Wilde* is an ignoble and pornographic book, truth compels me to say that I cannot support all Sherard's account of the facts as to Wilde's life and his activities. Unfortunately it is within my personal knowledge that many of the things related by Harris about Wilde at this time, which Sherard rejects as obvious lies, are perfectly true in essence, though Harris generally gets the details wrong and twists them in such a way as to represent himself as an altruistic and quixotic friend which he was very far from being. I hate contradicting Sherard, whose devotion to Wilde, and the chivalry which has made him spend

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half of his life defending him, I admire and respect. I do not therefore propose to go into details. I will merely give one example of how Sherard goes wrong. He characterises Harris's story of Esterhazy confessing, when he was drunk, that he himself had written the *Borderau* for which Dreyfus was condemned, as a ludicrous lie which no reasonable being could possibly believe. Well, I happen to know that it is perfectly true. Esterhazy confessed to Rowland Strong, brother of the Bishop of Oxford, at that time Paris correspondent of the *Morning Post* and *The Sunday Times*.

Strong was an intimate friend of mine (as he was, till they quarrelled, with Robert Sherard) and I was frequently in his company at the time when he became *lié* with Esterhazy. The story is perfectly true, and though I cannot absolutely swear that I was actually present when Esterhazy confessed, I heard all about it from Strong the next day, and so did Oscar Wilde. Wilde and Esterhazy and Strong and I frequently dined together both before and after the confession. When Esterhazy confessed that he had written the *Borderau*, Strong's journalistic instincts were powerfully stimulated, and he carried Esterhazy off to London to see Mrs. Bere the proprietress of *The Sunday Times* and to arrange for a well-paid newspaper 'scoop.' The scoop was partially spoilt because

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by the time Esterhazy got to London he had 'sobered up,' and he withdrew his confession and refused to sign the document which Strong had prepared. Hence a violent rupture and quarrel between Strong and Esterhazy, though Strong actually got five hundred pounds from Mrs. Bere.

All this has really very little to do with Oscar Wilde, so I refrain from enlarging on it. I merely give it as an example of the danger of assuming that any story, however fantastic, is necessarily untrue, especially when it is related in connection with Oscar's last days in Paris. Everything that happened at that time was fantastic. I have frequently told Sherard that there is a whole side of Wilde's life of which he never knew anything at all because Wilde concealed it from him. I could give other instances from Sherard's book, but I deliberately refrain, because, anyhow, I agree with him that even if a thing is true it by no means follows that one is bound to reveal it. Harris, in addition to many sheer lies, put a number of things about Wilde in his book which were true but which he would have refrained from mentioning if he had really been, as he pretended to be, Wilde's devoted friend. Harris's first and last object in writing his book was to make money, and in pursuance of this object he was, as he always was when money was concerned,

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utterly without scruple or conscience. Anyhow I decline to separate the truth from the lies in his ignoble book. I will merely say that his whole picture of Wilde, whom he represents as a whining ‘Sissy,’ is utterly false and misleading.

Oscar’s Wilde’s last days in Paris were by no means all dismal and gloomy. He had, as Shaw truly says, an unconquerable gaiety of soul which ever sustained him, and, while he had lost the faculty of writing, he retained to the last his inimitable supremacy as a talker. I retain glowing memories of dinners at *cafés* and subsequent amazing ‘talks’ when he held his audience spell-bound as he discoursed in his exquisite voice of all things in heaven and earth, now making his hearers rock with laughter and now bringing tears into their eyes. Such talk as Oscar’s now no longer exists, as far as my experience goes. I have never known anyone to come anywhere near him. I quote here a masterly appreciation of him by Freddie Benson (E. F. Benson) taken from his *Victorian Peep-Show*: ‘It seemed almost right that any vain excess or extravagance should be condoned in so lavish a maker of mirth who talked as he could talk. It was no wonder that his brilliance should dazzle and intoxicate himself as well as his listeners. . . Like Vivian in his *Decay of Lying*, he was prepared to prove anything

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He loved a string of jewelled phrases in his spoken word as well as in his writing, and if possibly they sometimes sounded like a recollection of Walter Pater, as perhaps they were, who cared so long as the Pied Piper continued to flute? How like was his talk to the play of a sunlit fountain!

It rose in the air constantly changing its shape, but always with the hue of the rainbow on it, and almost before you could realise the outline of this jet or that, it had vanished and another sparkled where it had been, so that you could hardly remember, even the moment afterwards, what exactly it was that had enchanted you. . . . Behind the brilliance of his talk, behind and infinitely more charming than his poses, in those days before his bitter ruin came on him, was an extraordinarily amiable and sunny spirit which wished well to everyone, and the sense of that gave him a charm that many of those who distrusted him and found him sinister were unable long to resist.'

I can bear witness to the fact that in his last days after the 'bitter ruin' that came on him, his talk was just as wonderful. He talked better, if possible, after his downfall than he did before. As Shaw rightly points out, after he could no longer write but could still talk as no other man ever did, he was entitled to all the money he could get. If he could have 'sent

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the hat round' every time he entertained a company of friends (or enemies or the indifferent) he would have been a richer man in Paris than he was when he was drawing royalties on the gross receipts of his plays in London.

He died, after an agonising few days of pain and torture, of a tumour in the brain. I was in Scotland shooting when I got a letter from Robert Ross saying he was ill but that it was 'nothing serious.' Ross, I am afraid, deliberately misled me. He did not, for reasons which I have explained in another book, want me to see Oscar again before he died. If I had known how ill he was I would have rushed to his side. The idea that he would die (he was only forty-six) for at least another twenty years never entered my head. I wrote to him enclosing a small cheque, and Ross, *mirabile dictu*, records that Oscar wept when he got my letter. Then a few days later came a telegram announcing his death. I rushed over to Paris immediately, but I never saw him again for he was already in his coffin by the time I arrived.

He was received into the Catholic Church by a Passionist Monk a few hours before he died.

I acted as chief mourner at his funeral in the beautiful Church of *Saint Germain-des-Prés* and followed his hearse to the grave in the cemetery of Bagneux (his body was subsequently trans-

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ferred to *Père Lachaise* where it now rests), and it certainly seemed to me then, and for many a long day afterwards, that the sun had gone down.

I wrote at that time a sonnet about him called *The Dead Poet*. It is too well known (not to say hackneyed) for me to quote it now, and I would rather quote another sonnet which I wrote about him three years later.

Here it is and let it end this book.

FORGETFULNESS

Alas! that Time should war against Distress,
And numb the sweet ache of remembered loss,
And give for sorrow's gold the indifferent dross
Of calm regret or stark forgetfulness.

I should have worn eternal mourning dress
And nailed my soul to some perennial cross,
And made my thoughts like restless waves that
toss

On the wild sea's intemperate wilderness.

But lo! came Life, and with its painted toys
Lured me to play again like any child.
Oh pardon me this weak inconstancy,
May my soul die if in all present joys,
Lapped in forgetfulness or sense-beguiled,
Yea, in my mirth, if I prefer not thee.

NOTE TO ILLUSTRATION ON PAGE 134

The letter of which a facsimile is printed is not dated, but obviously it was written from Bernaval in the early part of September 1897, about three months after Wilde's release from prison. The letter is important because it is one of a group written to me by him at that time which clearly establish the fact that the strange delusions about me to which he gave expression in the unpublished part of his prison letter (*De Profundis*) had by this time completely disappeared. In this prison letter he had made the amazing statement that I had interfered with his literary activities and that he 'never wrote anything' while I was with him. As I have pointed out, this is the exact opposite of the truth. From the moment I met him till the day of his death he scarcely wrote a line when I was absent from him, the exception being the *De Profundis* letter which was a letter written to me beginning 'Dear Bosie' and signed 'yr. affectionate friend Oscar Wilde.' Almost immediately after he wrote me the letter reproduced in facsimile he joined me in the Villa at Posilipo, Naples.

